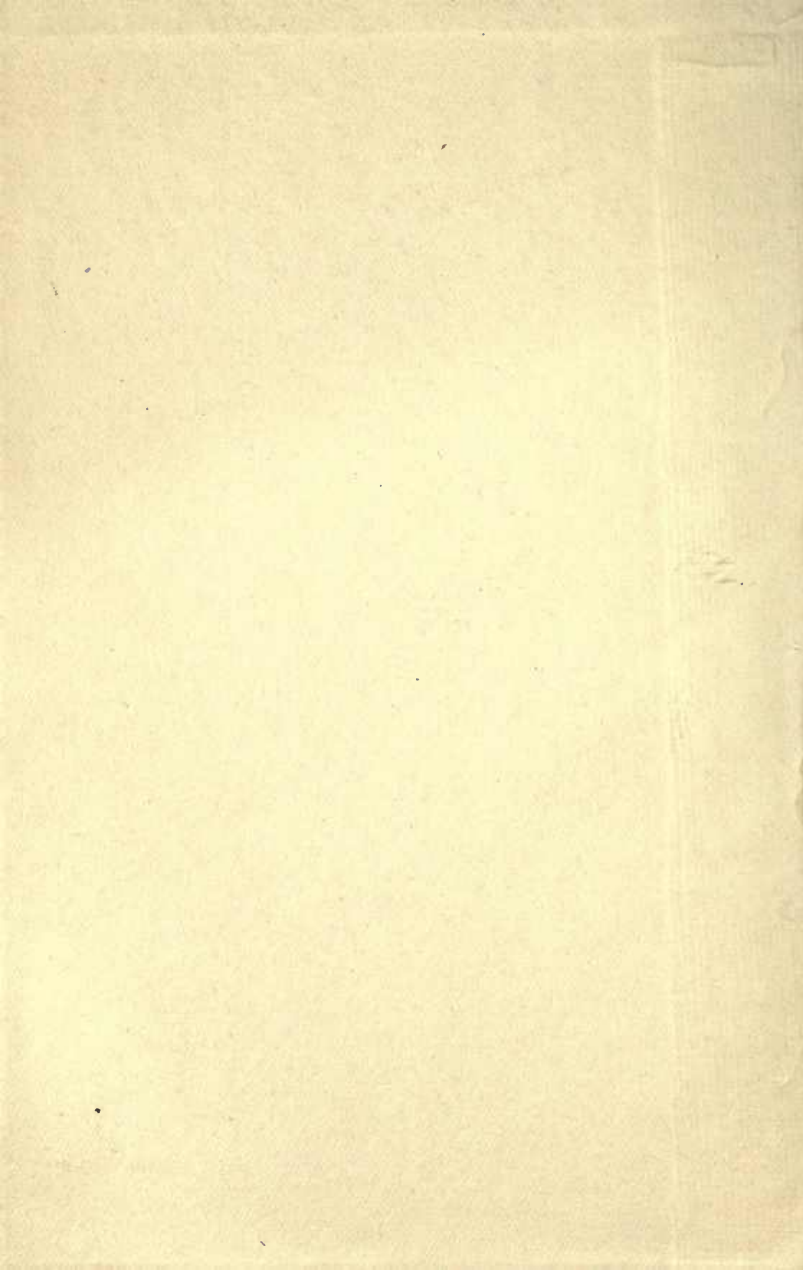




THE M.M.C.
A STORY OF THE GREAT ROCKIES

CHARLOTTE M. VAILE



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"THE OLD MAN STOOD ALONE ON THE ROCKY SLOPE."

THE M. M. C.

A STORY OF THE GREAT ROCKIES

BY

CHARLOTTE M. VAILE

AUTHOR OF "THE ORCUTT GIRLS," "SUE ORCUTT"
ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

SEARS GALLAGHER



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THE M. M. C.

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THE M. M. C.

A Story of the Great Rockies.



CHAPTER I.

ON THE EVE OF FLIGHT.

“IF I’m not back at supper time, don’t wait for me. It’s my last tramp, you know, and I must make the most of it.”

The girl who said it stood for a moment in the doorway of a cottage conspicuous for its spruce appearance in the crowded line which made up the main street of Silvercrest, then stepped briskly out into the afternoon sunshine.

A pretty woman with a delicate face and bright dark eyes looked after her wistfully. She did not strike one as the sort of person who would herself enjoy

tramping. "Oh, if you *must* go!" she said. "But don't spread your wings when you get above timber-line and fly away home without a good bye to any of us."

The girl looked back with a protesting smile. "Do you think my heart is light enough for that? Oh, Cousin Kitty, what an ingrate you make me!"

An ingrate Alice Hildreth certainly was not, and as she took her way through the mining camp, stopping now and then for a word with some group of children who called her "Teacher," and asked sorrowfully if she were really going "way back East," she could not escape a little feeling of sadness. To return to the dear New England home after a long absence was surely a joyous thing, but to bid good bye, perhaps forever, to people and places that for six busy, happy months had been part of her life was, after all, not easy.

It was with no thought of the school in this place that the girl had come to Colorado at the first. The mission which had brought her into the shadow of the great Rockies had been that of companion to an invalid aunt, who had hoped to regain her broken health in a sunny city of the plains. But when, at the close of an unavailing winter, the latter had turned with homesick longing to the East again, Alice had remained behind, lured into the very heart of the mountains, by the persuasions of that prosperous cousin who had engaged himself in the mining interests of Silvercrest, and who, for the season, had charge of securing a teacher for the public school.

He had offered her the position, shrewdly guessing that some motive beyond that of a mere visit would be needed to keep her for a summer in his home, and the girl had accepted the offer

with delight. She had, indeed, felt it her duty to confide to her cousin that she was only nineteen (she fondly believed that she looked much older) and that her experience in teaching was of the slightest, but when the genial official only smiled at the disclosure and offered to "risk it," she had dismissed her doubts and entered on the work with real enthusiasm.

And now that work was ended. The school had disbanded for the long vacation, and just at the beginning of winter, bewailed of all the camp, the girl was about to set her face towards home.

It was a thrifty young camp, this of Silvercrest. Its name it had borrowed from the great white peak which rose conspicuous above its fellows, snow-crowned through all the seasons. But the name was not merely a poetic fancy. A wealth of silver and gold lay in the

heart of the great rough pile, and seemed indeed to be hidden through all the region. It was only three years since a lucky prospector stumbled on the first great "find," but the town had already passed beyond the stage of a "summer camp," and waited only the coming of the railroad, as its settlers confidently believed, for the boom which should lift it at once to the importance of a full-fledged city.

In appearance the place did not differ much from others of its sort; a huddle of houses between the mountains, one-story frames for the greater part, many of them still displaying building-paper for clapboards and stove-pipes for chimneys, with a sprinkling of taller buildings, among which one could not fail to note the usual proportions of saloons and lodging-houses.

The girl's walk did not lead her the full length of the camp. Passing the

school-house, the most substantial building in the place and one which did duty not only as a temple of learning but occasional church and variety hall, she turned from the main street and took a path which led away among the hills. Far out on this path lived her friend, the old prospector. The special object of her trip was to say good bye to him.

It was a long walk she had before her, but she took it after the manner of one used to climbing, resting now and then, while she gave herself up to the delight of the widening and wonderful landscape. Her eyes were bright, and there was an unusual color in her cheeks when she stopped at last before a cave-like opening in the hill, close to a miner's cabin.

It was not the first opening of the sort which she had passed in the course of her

walk. Indeed, the country might be said to be honeycombed with them, — “prospect holes,” as they were called, — but this was the first at which she had sent more than a passing glance. For a minute she stood with the air of one listening intently, then stepped inside the rocky opening. It was the mouth of a tunnel which extended for more than a hundred feet into the mountain, so dark that her eyes, filled with the light of the world outside, could not distinguish the two figures working at the farther end, till one of them, turning, made a little spot of brightness with the flame of the candle stuck in his cap. Her own figure, outlined against the blue of the opening, was plain to be seen, and she announced herself now with a sudden call.

“Do you want a visitor?” she cried, and the next instant the two had stopped their work and were hurrying towards her

with exclamations of welcome. One of them was a boy apparently a little younger than herself, but the other, who hastened before him, was a man, who might have been upwards of sixty; a tall spare figure, with a face half covered by a grizzled beard, and quick gray eyes that looked out from under shaggy brows and a deeply lined forehead.

"Well, I should rather say we wanted *you!*" he cried, seizing the girl's hand in both of his. "It's queer, now, how things come round. We were talking 'bout you jest a minute ago, Lex 'n' I, an' I was saying seemed as if I couldn't stan' it not to see you again before you went away."

"Oh, I couldn't have gone without *that*," said the girl, "and I came on purpose. It's my last chance, you know, for to-morrow I start."

He placed an empty powder keg for her near the mouth of the tunnel, and seated

himself on another beside it before he answered, "So they tell me. Well, I s'pose we hain't got any claim to keep you here, now the school is done, but 'pears to me it stopped too soon this year."

The girl shook her head, with a smile. "Oh, no, Mr. Cornforth!" she said. "There have been six months of it, and it's high time now for vacation. You think so, don't you, Lex?" she added, turning to the boy, who stood near leaning on his pick.

He did not reply with a smile as bright as hers. "We boys weren't caring so very much about it," he said.

"But I'll warrant the little teacher was," said the old man, "and I can't say's I blame her any." He looked at her in silence for a moment, and then added slowly, "An' so you're going back to the old Bay State, right into the home corner? I wouldn't mind if I was going back there

for a while myself. It's nigh on forty years since I struck out."

There was a note of homesickness in his voice as he said it that went straight to the girl's heart. It was not the first time she had heard him refer thus tenderly to the "home corner." Indeed, it was the first bond of the friendship which had grown so strong between them, that she had come fresh from those same New England hills which he had known in his far-away boyhood. Not that they were actually natives of the same town, but the score or two of miles which lay between his early home and hers did not count for much with one who had wandered across half a continent. It was, as he had said, almost forty years since he left those quiet hills to seek his fortune in this strange far country. In the search he had climbed the mountains, and threaded the gorges, delved in the rocks,

and sifted the sands, but with all his toil he had won nothing except the name "Old Hopeful," spoken always with a half-pitying smile by those who had watched the unavailing struggle of his life. Yet in spite of every disappointment, and through every hardship, he had kept his own sturdy faith in the good time coming and worked uncomplainingly on. A type of his class, and a patient kindly soul as ever bore the "whips and scorns of time," was this old prospector.

He had paused after the last words, and his eyes rested for a moment with a far-away look on the landscape which lay outside the tunnel. He glanced back now, and seeming to read a question in the girl's face, said quickly,—

"I didn't come away because I hadn't a good home, you understand. I never had a thing to complain of. Our folks were middling well off, an' my father was

working the old farm for all there was in it to give us children an education. He kind o' wanted to make a preacher o' me, but when I was one 'n' twenty I took the western fever bad, 'n' there was no curing it back there."

"Did you ever wish you hadn't come away?" asked Alice, impelled to the question by the contrasting pictures which framed themselves in her thoughts at that moment.

"Well, no—I can't say as I ever did," said the prospector, reflectively. "I've had a tolerable share of hard luck, but I never wanted to give up the chance I saw before me. And I couldn't have made a preacher, anyhow," he added shamefacedly. "I hadn't got the gift o' gab, 'n' I never did feel easy setting round in good clothes."

There was no danger of embarrassment from the elegance of those he wore

now. His corduroy suit, though whole, was of the roughest, and his boots, on whose enormously heavy soles the letters "O. K." were traced in huge round nail-heads, had apparently never known the color of anything but clay.

"But you'll come back to New England sometime," said Alice, earnestly.

"Oh, sartin, sartin," said the prospector, cheerily. "I count sure on seeing the old places again before I die, but I can't leave this country, you know, till I have something to show for all the time I've spent out here." He sent a sudden glance along the low, dark walls in whose shadow they were sitting, and added, "When I sell the M. M. C., I guess I shall be ready to start."

The M. M. C. was the prospector's latest and dearest hope. In actual presence, as it lay in the shadows behind them, it seemed to Alice Hildreth only

a damp and gloomy cavern of the mountains. Perhaps he read the thought in her mind, for he raised his finger as he leaned towards her, and his eyes gleamed with the brightness of an eager confidence, as he said,—

“Mebbe it don’t look like anything to you, Miss Hildreth, but I tell you there’s ore in here of a sort that’ll make folks open their eyes some day, and, mark my words, it won’t be long now before we catch the lead.”

“Oh, if you only could, if you only could!” cried the girl. Her cheeks grew fairly pale in the eagerness with which her heart responded to his hope. Then the fear made its way again, and she added sorrowfully, “But I’ve heard you say yourself that one can never be really certain what is in a mine beforehand.”

“Oh, to be sure, you can’t tell every-

thing," admitted the old man, his voice dropping a little. "Signs will fail, an' the way some veins act is enough to deceive the very elect. Still, it ain't all guess-work — not by no manner o' means." His voice grew confident again, and he added, "I tell you it's a long lane that has no turning, an' I've always stood to it that spite of everything, an' come what may, a man's best course is to hold right on."

"It's holding on sometimes that works the mischief," observed the boy, in a low voice.

"Aye, aye, Lex," said the prospector, answering the twinkle in the lad's eyes with one in his own. "It won't do to push that rule too far in special cases. You 'n' I know that.

"You see," he continued, turning to Alice with an air of explanation, "a man's between hawk and buzzard all

the time in the mining business. There's such a thing as holding on too long, an' then again there's such a thing as letting go too soon. I've taken my chances both ways over 'n' over,—and missed it," he added, with a momentary knotting of his forehead,—“missed it every time there was anything big at stake.”

The reminiscent mood was on him now, and he went on, urged by the interest in his listener's face.

“There was the Down Easter. I sold that property for a hundred dollars to the men that took half a million out of her. I'd worked it stiddy for a year, an' put everything I could rake 'n' scrape together into it, but I gave it up at last as a bad job, an' the fellows that took her opened the best vein in the camp with the very first shot they put in.”

He shut his teeth hard on the remembrance, and for a moment his sinewy

hands were clenched tightly together. But the bitterness was gone from his voice as he went on.

“After that it was just my luck to miss it the other way. That time it was in the Aunt Sarah. I’d got onto a pay streak that time, no mistake, and I named it for the old maid aunt that brought me up. She was one of the stiddy-going kind; you knew jest where to find her every time. Well, somehow I made sure that vein was going to act jest like her, an’ my pardner ’n’ I refused a handsome offer when we’d been working her a little while. But I’ll be thumped if she didn’t peter out *completely* right away after that, and we couldn’t sell her for enough to fit us out for another season.”

This remembrance did not seem to rankle like that of the Down Easter, and there was a touch of drollery in his

voice as he added, "After that I never named any more claims for my own relations, only one for Uncle Jim Dexter. I thought mebbe that would work contry-wise too, but it didn't. It turned out to be jest as shif'less 'n' slack-twisted as the old man himself."

They all smiled at this, and then the boy said softly, "But you named the M. M. C. here for little Mary. You don't forget that, do you?"

He had come close to the old man's side while the latter was talking, and stood looking at him now with an affectionate smile. They were close comrades, these two. The boy was a waif who had drifted into the other's life long years before, and since that day had shared in every fortune that fell to the prospector's lot. The latter gave a quick nod at the low reminder.

"Yes, the M. M. C. is named for my

little Mary," he said; "but that was her doings, not mine. 'You must name it for me, Daddy,' says she, 'and then your luck will be sure to come.' An' do you know, Miss Hildreth," he added, turning with an impressive gesture to his visitor, "the way she looked when she said that made me feel, then an' there, that there was something in it. I tell you these little folks see into things a deal farther than we do sometimes."

Alice did not speak for a moment. She felt, with a throb of pity which she might have spared, that this old man, with the deep lines in his face, and the long hard years of disappointment behind him, was still himself only a child at heart.

"Well, I'm sure it's a nice name," she said, with an effort; "I remember the first time I heard it I wondered what those letters stood for. I didn't know then that you had a daughter."

She said the last words tenderly, for she knew that this child, from whom he had been separated for months, was the idol of her father's heart. There had been a romance in his life, short indeed and late, but a living reality to him still in the person of his little motherless daughter.

"Yes, I have my Mary," he said, and his face shone with a brightness it had not worn even when he talked of the fortune in the M. M. C. "I do wish you could have seen her before you went away. It don't seem right that you should have been in camp so long an' not have known my little girl. I had a good mind to go and get her when you took the school, but I'd promised her for a year to folks that can do more for her than I can, an' I wouldn't go back on my word. But you'll see her one of these days when I bring her

East to get her education. That's what I've set my heart on. It's the very first thing I'll do when my luck comes."

He paused for a moment, then added with a sudden trembling in his voice, "If it warn't for her I don't know as I should care much about the luck one way or another. This rough life is good enough for me. I've followed it so long that mebbe I couldn't fit in with any other now, but it ain't the right sort for her. No, nor for Lex neither," he exclaimed, stretching out his hand to the boy. "He's fit for something better than to go knocking round the world as I have, an' I want to give him a fair start before I pass 'over the range.'"

The boy's face quivered. It was a strong young face, not showing emotion too easily, but at this moment it was all aflame with feeling.

“Uncle Eben,” he said, “you’ve done more for me now than I can ever pay you for. All I want is a chance to do something for you.”

They looked at each other for a moment with an affection which took no note of their visitor, and she, feeling that if the good bye were to be said steadily, she must say it soon, rose from her seat.

“You’ll write to me now and then, won’t you?” she said. “Of course I shall send you a letter as soon as I get back, and tell you about my journey, and how everything looks in the home corner,” — she loved the phrase for his sake, — “but you must tell me how things are going here. I shall be so anxious to know, and don’t wait a minute to send me word if you really strike it in the M. M. C.”

“We’ll do it, we’ll do it!” said the old man, eagerly. “Lex is handier at the pen

than I am nowadays, an' I guess he won't need much urging to write to you. But I tell you, you needn't be a bit surprised if you get that word about the M. M. C. on short order. We've settled down to stiddy work in here now, for there's a deal to be done before the year runs out, an' it wouldn't be the strangest thing that ever happened if we should strike it before the new year comes."

They passed together out of the tunnel as he spoke. The short afternoon was almost spent, and purple shadows were creeping across the mountains.

"I'll go down to camp with you, Miss Hildreth," said Lex. He had been her escort too often during the months in which he had been her pupil to doubt her willingness, and he added, turning to the prospector, "I'll look in at the post-office while I'm there. Maybe there's a letter from Mary."

There was a last word of parting, a clasp of the hands, and then the young girl went her way, leaving the old man standing alone on the rocky slope. It had been many a year since any good bye had been as hard for him to say as this, and his eyes followed her with a yearning tenderness till a bend in the narrow trail took her out of his sight.

“Well, she’s gone,” he muttered to himself, “an’ I wouldn’t hold her back if I could, but seems as if ’twas taking something right out of me to have her go.”

He drew his sleeve across his eyes as he walked towards his cabin. At the door he paused and glanced up at the western sky. Something in its appearance fastened his attention, for he gazed a moment with contracting brows, then darted a quick glance towards a point at the north where a great cliff projected sharply from the mass of the mountains.

Gray clouds were shifting uneasily about it, half concealing its rugged outlines. The prospector's lips shaped themselves into an inaudible whistle. He had lived too much with Nature not to have a quick perception of her moods, and there was foreboding in his voice as he muttered, —

“I never saw the clouds hang round old Craggy that way when it didn't mean the biggest kind of a storm. Mebbe, after all, she won't get away to-morrow.”

CHAPTER II.

CAGED.

IT was certainly a risk which Alice Hildreth had taken in prolonging her stay in Silvercrest up to the very edge of December. There was a distinct possibility that she might be shut in by the snows of winter at the very time she would be ready to start for home.

But Alice could not with good conscience have shortened the six months' term, which was all the schooling that the camp provided for its children during the year, and it must be admitted that the danger of blockades had never been much enlarged on in her presence by those who were most interested in her staying. Perhaps it should be said

in their defence that, although a fall of snow was something to be looked for in this region from the earliest days of October, as a matter of fact such snows usually passed away quickly, and autumn often prolonged itself with mellow brightness to the end of a charming November.

In view of all this, the storm which actually came, shutting the girl up in this mountain fastness on the very eve of departure, was a thing hard to bear. There were many in the camp, less weather-wise than the old prospector, who knew, before they went to bed that night, that the storm was close upon them, but Alice was not one of these. She finished the packing of her trunk and fell asleep in undisturbed expectation of the journey which was to begin in the morning.

With morning the whole face of the

world had changed. The snow had begun stealthily at midnight, and seemed not so much to be falling now as to be pouring in sheets upon a landscape about to be blotted from existence. Alice had gone to bed with the curtain raised that she might waken early, but a heavier drapery than the one she had lifted hung in clinging folds upon the casement, and shut out even the poor gray thing which had come to make apology for morning. A stamping of feet in the hall below at length aroused her. She started up, realized with straining eyes what had happened, then, sick at heart, dressed and hurried down-stairs.

Her cousin, John St. Cloud, was in the breakfast room before her, his hands stretched out to the fire, and drops of melted snow shining in his close brown beard.

"Well, little girl," he said, lifting his



"HER COUSIN . . . WAS IN THE BREAKFAST
ROOM BEFORE HER."

eyebrows with a questioning smile as she entered, "it's a slip between the cup and the lip for you this time, I'm afraid."

The lip from which the cup had been snatched away trembled for a moment beyond Alice's power to steady.

"Cousin John," she said imploringly, "*don't* you think there's any chance of the stage going out to-day?"

Mr. St. Cloud lifted his brows a trifle higher. "Not to put the case too strongly, Alice, I don't *think* there is," he said. He was very fond of this little cousin of his, but a disposition to tease her now and then was a temptation he could not resist, and there was just a suspicion of amusement in his voice as he inquired politely whether she had looked out of doors.

A small image of himself who was perched in a high chair at the table broke

in upon the pause with a shrill exclamation, "Oh, I know you can't go, Cousin Alice! The road is all stopped up, and the stage would be snowed under if it tried to go out. You've just got to stay here with us. I heard papa and mamma say so."

The tears rushed suddenly into Alice's eyes, and it was well for her that a more considerate member of the family entered the room at that moment. Mrs. St. Cloud saw instantly that their disappointed guest was not receiving much consolation from the masculine part of the household, and she hastened to supply it as best she could.

"My dear," she said, putting her arms around the girl, "I know this is a dreadful disappointment, and I wouldn't have had it happen for anything in the world, but you really mustn't blame us if we can't feel blue over the prospect of keeping you with us a few days longer."

"A few days," repeated her husband. "Don't be too sure it's only for a few days. It looks very much as if we were in for a siege, and it means something besides poetry to be snow-bound up here. We were shut in four weeks last winter, and the winter before —"

"Jack," interrupted his wife, indignantly. "How can you have the heart to frighten Alice by talking in that way? Those long blockades came later in the season. Why, there's never been a time when the valley was closed all through December!"

"Not that we know of," admitted Mr. St. Cloud. He began to say something about the memory of the oldest inhabitant in Silvercrest not reaching back very far, but the distress in Alice's face finally stopped him, and he said instead, "Well, don't worry, child. You needn't be a bit afraid of having to stay here all winter. I only want to prepare you for the worst,

you know, so that you'll be agreeably surprised if you should get off in a few days."

"Oh, depend upon it, we shall have an open road again very soon!" said Mrs. St. Cloud. Then, feeling that she had done her duty by Alice, she could not help adding with a sigh, "Dear knows, I wouldn't keep you in a place like this against your will, but it'll be more lonesome than ever for *me* when you're gone."

Mrs. St. Cloud, it should be remarked, had never shared her husband's enthusiasm for life in a mining camp. For his sake she endured it and made his home the pleasantest place in Silvercrest, but in her heart she protested against her rough surroundings, and far less than Alice had she ever really entered into the spirit of the place.

There was no response to the last remark, and the family seated themselves at the breakfast table. Alice tried to make

her part in the conversation, but there was no getting away from the subject of the storm, and it was an effort to make the best of things, when she said presently, —

“Well, I’m glad I took that walk yesterday, even if I’m not going away to-day. This snow would prevent my ever getting out so far again, and I wouldn’t have missed seeing Mr. Cornforth once more for anything.”

“You and Old Hopeful seem to be great friends,” observed Mr. St. Cloud. “He’s always bragging you up lately — you and the M. M. C.”

“Well, I don’t know why he should brag about me,” said Alice, flushing a little. “But the M. M. C. is a good subject if it’s as good as he thinks it is. He was telling me about it yesterday, and he feels *so* sure there’s a fortune in it.”

“Oh, of course,” said St. Cloud, rather

contemptuously. "He's always sure that he's just on the point of striking it. He's been sure for the last hundred years."

A look of real pain came into Alice's face. This light way of referring to the disappointments of her poor old friend jarred upon her. "Oh, you don't think he's going to be disappointed again, do you?" she said pleadingly.

St. Cloud shrugged his shoulders. As a mining man of large experience and superintendent of the most successful mine in Silvercrest, he was not to be drawn into the folly of passing judgment on an undeveloped claim. He did not reply at once, and his wife took up the query, saying in her impulsive way, —

"Well, if there's any truth in the old saying that 'labor has a sure reward,' Eben Cornforth ought to get *something* for all his hard work."

"I don't take much stock in those old

saws," observed St. Cloud. "That one was made for the copybooks by some Down-Easter who knew nothing about the kind of labor that goes on in these mountains."

"Well, it does seem to be luck, not labor, that wins in mining," said Mrs. St. Cloud, in a tone of disgust. "But I must say I can't see any justice in it when a good honest soul like Eben Cornforth works year in and year out without having a thing to show for it, and a man like Dudleigh Drayton comes out here and makes a fortune right away."

"Softly, softly," said her husband. "It takes something besides luck to run the mining business, and, if you please, mining is one thing and prospecting is quite another. Because a man has the patience to keep on year after year, pecking holes in the sides of the mountains, it doesn't follow that he has any claim to the

prizes that fall to capital and business ability. Those are two things that prospectors don't have as a general rule, and Cornforth is no exception."

He paused a moment, then added: "But when you speak of Drayton, it's a different matter. He's the sort of man who'd make a success of anything he took hold of, and he has plenty of money to back him. When he comes into a camp it means business. He goes ahead to develop his property, sets a mill running, brings in Eastern capital, and makes things lively. He's the kind we need out here, and for my part I don't grudge him his luck when he opens up a pay streak."

He broke off suddenly with a laugh. "There's Drayton now!" he exclaimed as the figure of a man passed the window. "What's that saying of yours, Kitty, about speaking of angels?"

“ I hope you don’t call *him* an angel ! ” said Mrs. St. Cloud. She arranged the dishes on the table before her rather nervously, and made haste to use her napkin on little Tommy’s face in the minute that elapsed before her husband ushered in their unexpected caller.

The latter was a tall, rather handsome man, hardly yet in the prime of life, with that indescribable something in his looks and manner which marks the successful man of affairs. The contrast which had just been drawn between him and the old prospector seemed to emphasize itself in every line of his alert face, in every movement of his erect figure, and in the very tones of his quiet, confident voice. Without doubt Mr. Dudleigh Drayton was the most prosperous and important man in Silvercrest ; the most unscrupulous, too, some might have added, but these were per-

haps envious of his rapid and brilliant successes.

He accepted the cup of coffee which Mrs. St. Cloud offered him, with an apology for making so early a call, and explained that he wished to accompany the superintendent to the mine in which they were jointly interested. Then turning to Alice, he said with a smile, "And so you're a prisoner among us, Miss Hildreth?"

"Fairly caged," chuckled St. Cloud, and, as if forgetful of the comfort he had lately offered her, he added, "We concluded we'd keep her here for the holidays."

"The holidays!" gasped Alice. "Oh, but you said — and the holidays are away at the end of the month!"

"Don't you mind him, Alice," said Mrs. St. Cloud, giving her husband a reproachful look. "It's just his talk."

"No, don't be frightened in advance,"

said Mr. Drayton, and he added in a sympathizing tone, "It would be dreadfully dull for you here, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Alice. "I don't think I should mind the dulness." She was silent for a moment, then in her straightforward, rather serious fashion added, "But my school is done now, and I've nothing to do here. There really seems to be no reason for my staying any longer, and I feel as if I ought to be going home."

Perhaps her way of putting it struck Mr. Drayton as odd, for his eyes rested on her face for a moment with a look half curious, half amused. He seemed about to say something when the superintendent interrupted in his jovial tone, —

"As for our camp being dull at the holidays, that is all a mistake. I tell you we have lively doings here along about that time."

He appealed to Mr. Drayton for confirmation of the statement, and the latter promptly assented, adding, however, as if with some reluctance, that the amusements of the place were hardly up as yet to those of Boston or New York.

"New York!" exclaimed little Tommy, who had been waiting with unusual forbearance for his chance at the conversation. "I've been to New York!"

"Have you?" said Mr. Drayton, who was on friendly terms with Tommy. "That's odd; I've been there, too."

"Does your grandmother live there?" demanded Tommy, getting excited. "Mine does, and I've been all round. It's a lots bigger camp than Silvercrest."

The laugh which followed this abashed Tommy into silence, and his delighted papa took advantage of the pause to turn the conversation back to the pleasures of camp at the holiday season.

"You mustn't think, Alice, that we folks up here let the days go by without getting any fun out of them. Last Christmas we had a Santa Claus to beat the nation—regular team of mountain elks, good as any reindeer in Lapland, and the way they went dashing through camp was a caution. We always manage to get up something uncommon, and there's a regular tournament at snowballing and snow-shoeing, not to mention some sort of high jinks in the evening."

He evidently felt that he had done the subject in fine style, but his wife inquired rather scornfully, "And at the New Year's?"

"Oh, at New Year's there's more of the same sort, and—" he paused in obvious effort to recall some other diversion of the camp, then with a sudden twinkle in his eyes, and a glance at Mr. Drayton, added, "Occasionally we have

something in the way of fireworks thrown in extra."

"I should think fireworks would be better for Fourth of July," observed Alice.

Her cousin laughed, and Mr. Drayton's moustache twitched a little, but Mrs. St. Cloud said in a tone which indicated that she at least did not think the joke a particularly good one, "He doesn't mean torpedoes and sky-rockets, my dear. The fireworks he refers to are strictly private and not intended for amusement."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," said Alice, and she appealed, in some bewilderment, to her cousin for an explanation.

"Ask Drayton," said the superintendent. "He knows more about it than I do."

Mr. Drayton looked as if he hardly

appreciated this tribute to his superior knowledge, but he answered easily. "I suppose your cousin refers to the relocation of mining claims the first of January. A pistol-shot at midnight sometimes announces the fact that the old year is ended and a piece of property has changed hands. There was a time when the new year set a good many echoes rattling among these hills, but there are not so many nowadays."

"No," said St. Cloud. "In these times, if a man has a claim that's worth anything, he generally works it promptly, and if it isn't worth anything, nobody cares to take it away from him."

He saw that Alice still looked perplexed, and to make the matter really clear to her, said seriously: "You see, Alice, the holder of an unpatented mining claim is obliged by law to put a hundred dollars' worth of work or im-

provements upon it every year. The year is regarded as ending on the thirty-first day of December, and if this work is not done then, the owner forfeits his title, and the claim is open to re-location; so you see if a mining man has anything to lose, he'd better not be napping when the year goes out, and if he has anything to make, he'd better look to it bright and early."

"I see," said Alice. She had learned much about mining during her stay in Silvercrest, but this particular phase of it was quite new to her. She looked thoughtful for a minute, and then said, "I should think it would be awfully hard for a man to lose his claim in that way, if he had meant to get all the work done and somehow failed of it just at the last."

"Not a bit too hard," said St. Cloud. "When a man locates a claim, it's his business to attend to it. If he puts off

doing his assessment work till the end of the year and expects to crowd it all in at the last minute, it serves him right if he gets left. Eh, Drayton?"

Mr. Drayton did not speak for a moment, then he said carelessly, "As far as I'm concerned, I'm willing that the man *who can* should make the most of his chance, when I leave anything in his way."

The subject dropped with this. Mr. Drayton fell to discussing snow-men with Tommy, and shortly after left the house with Mr. St. Cloud. At the door, however, he turned back, and said to Alice, who was looking out at the window with a very pensive face,—

"I really hope, Miss Hildreth, that you won't be kept here long against your will, but if it should happen so, don't be afraid you'll have no work to do. Something will be sure to turn up to meet

the demands of an energy like yours." He smiled as he said it, then, with a pleasant "good morning," withdrew.

For some minutes Alice turned that speech in her thoughts as she watched the two sturdy figures making their way through the snow. She suspected it had been spoken more in jest than earnest, but that did not prevent her finding a bit of good counsel in it. It was certainly not likely that anything very important would "turn up" for her to do, but there were ways enough in which she might be helpful to her friends, and this, after all, was the best cure for ennui. She determined that she would at least not be idle, and with more real heroism than it sometimes takes for larger things she threw herself into Mrs. St. Cloud's plans for the day and the entertainment of Tommy, who was restless from the lack of his usual out-door play.

But a chance of doing something quite unexpected really seemed to open before her that evening. She was playing backgammon with her cousin when he said suddenly, —

“Oh, there’s a bit of news you’ll be interested to hear, Alice, apropos of that friend of yours whom we were discussing this morning.”

“You mean Mr. Cornforth?” she asked, lifting her head quickly.

“Yes; I heard to-day that he got word last night his little girl was sick, and started off at once for Redridge.”

“Dear me!” cried Mrs. St. Cloud. “How *could* he go with this storm just coming on?”

“I guess the question with him was how he could go if he waited,” said her husband.

“Well, it’s a mercy he got the word,” said Mrs. St. Cloud; “I wonder if the child is very sick.”

Alice did not speak for a moment. The surprise and pity of it quite overwhelmed her. Evidently Lex had found the letter with its sorry tidings at the post-office when he came down the evening before. The finding at least was something to be thankful for. Aloud she said, "I wonder if Lex went too."

"No; I understood that Cornforth went alone," said St. Cloud.

"Then Lex shall come here and stay with us until he gets back!" cried Mrs. St. Cloud. "It would be miserable for him out there alone in that cabin, and I always did like that boy."

Alice gave her a quick, grateful look. "Oh, that would be splendid for Lex," she said, "and besides, I could help him with his studies as long as I stay. He's a real good scholar and would like that. I wonder if Mr. Cornforth will get back before I go away," she added, making a

rapid forecast of how much they might be able to accomplish.

"Not much probability of that, I should say," replied St. Cloud. "The road to Redridge is like Jordan, 'a hard road to trabble,' and Cornforth isn't likely to take it again in a hurry, especially if his child is sick."

"It's a very bad time for him to go," said Mrs. St. Cloud, with a sigh.

"Very," assented her husband. And then he gave his dice-box an impatient shake and told Alice it was her turn to play.

CHAPTER III.

DANGER AHEAD.

MR. ST. CLOUD had undoubtedly spoken the truth when he said that to be snow-bound in the Rocky Mountains meant something besides poetry. That isolation which comes as a brief winter experience, not without its own peculiar pleasure, to the secluded farmhouse or the rural village of the East, bears slight resemblance to the shutting up within itself of a little mountain town at the time of a snow blockade. In a place like Silvercrest, lying far away from the railroad, the only communication left with the outer world is through the adventurer on snow-shoes, and even he

does not risk the trip without strong motive.

It was ten days now that Alice had been a prisoner, and through all that time storm had followed storm, defying all the efforts of the settlers to open the valley road, and heaping the snow deeper and yet deeper around the camp. The girl wondered what would be the end of it, and when her cousin showed her one day a photograph of the place as it appeared during the first winter of its existence,—a scene consisting of a dozen stove-pipes projecting blackly above a waste of snow,—she really felt a passing terror.

“The cabins were under the snow, you see,” the exhibitor had explained, “and the people actually lived there for a while with tunnels connecting their doors. But it couldn’t happen again,” he added cheerfully. “There are too

many of us here now, and we'll manage to keep the sky above our heads if we don't do anything else."

In all this time nothing had been seen of the boy, Lex Flemming, and Mrs. St. Cloud's generous plan for his comfort still remained only a plan. Alice could not understand it. She had thought he would want to tell her about the old prospector's sudden departure, and she had felt sure he would wish to reassert the championship at snow-shoeing which he had held for two winters among his mates, but even for this he did not appear in the camp. His absence began to trouble her, and Mrs. St. Cloud's explanation of it did not tend to lessen her anxiety.

"It wouldn't surprise *me* any to hear that he's sick," she declared with emphasis. "I'm sure it's enough to make him sick to live in that lonesome way, cooking meals

for himself that most likely aren't fit to eat, and staying all alone at night, with the wind howling round the cabin, and nothing to keep any one from coming in who chose to lift the latch. It's bad enough for men to live that way, but for a boy like Lex it's simply awful."

She proposed to her husband that he should send a man out to the cabin to make inquiry, but he laughed at the suggestion. "Now don't you worry about that boy," he said. "He's used to roughing it, and he wouldn't thank us for treating him like a baby. If he doesn't come down, it's because he's got something else on hand. Just you wait. He'll show up when he gets ready."

And as if to make good the superintendent's words, Lex did appear that very day. His friends at the cottage saw him coming, and between them both he had hard work to answer ques-

tions fast enough when they had him fairly inside the door. These were of course at first about Eben Cornforth, and of him Lex had but little to tell.

"There wasn't much in the letter," he said, when pressed for its exact wording. "All it said was that little Mary was sick, and he'd better come as quick as he could. He didn't wait long to start, I can tell you, for he knew there wasn't a minute to lose."

"And I suppose you haven't heard from him since," said Mrs. St. Cloud.

"No," said the boy, sorrowfully. "I thought the mail would come in to-day, it's been so pleasant, and that there might be a letter, but there wasn't any."

"Well, you mustn't let that trouble you," said Alice. "Why, I haven't had a letter from home since the blockade began!" and for the moment she really felt that there was some advantage in the deprivation.

"No," said Mrs. St. Cloud, "there's everything to prevent one getting letters nowadays, and I presume Mr. Cornforth is all taken up with the child, anyway."

She leaned forward in her chair now and looked at the boy with closer scrutiny. It was time to ask how he himself was faring in his guardian's absence. But to all that she had feared on his account Lex made cheerful denial. His health and appetite were perfect, and he slept soundly of nights. Why not? The roaring of storms without did not disturb him safe in the cabin. As for tramps, there were none abroad now; but if one *should* come along some darksome night, Lex (smiling broadly) declared that he should give him a share in his bunk and sleep the better for his company. As for feeling it a hardship to cook his own meals, he was used to that, and with

all modesty would submit that he could fry bacon or "toss a flapjack with the best of them." Evidently there was no making a martyr of the boy while he himself was on the stand to testify.

Mrs. St. Cloud drew a long breath as he finished. Then she said, "Well, I'm sure it's a credit to you, Lex, to take such a cheerful view of things, but for all that it isn't a good way for you to live; it isn't a safe and proper way; and now we want you to stay with us the rest of the time till Mr. Cornforth gets back. That's been the plan from the first, only we couldn't get a chance to tell you so."

Lex blushed like a girl. The surprise and pleasure of such an invitation almost took his breath away, but something evidently stood in the way of his acceptance. "I should like to come," he began, "and it's ever so kind of you to ask me, but —"

He hesitated, and Mrs. St. Cloud broke in impatiently, "Indeed, I shan't believe you think it's kind of us at all if you don't come. There can't be any reason why you should stay out there if you'd rather be here. It wouldn't be a bit of trouble to us, and we've set our hearts on it. Alice, tell him the plan you have to make the time really worth something to him, and I'm sure he won't refuse after that."

She nodded at him confidently with the last words, then answering a call from the kitchen left the two together.

"Oh, you must come, Lex!" said Alice, earnestly. "Mrs. St. Cloud really wishes it very much, and so do I. It would be so much pleasanter for you, and only think what a chance you'd have to go on with your studies with me to help you. There's arithmetic, now! You didn't leave off at the right place. Suppose we take it up again, and I'll engage that you shall be

master of everything in percentage if we have a week together. Come, Lex; it's a chance!"

Her eyes sparkled as she spoke, but the boy's face had grown very sober. "Oh, Miss Hildreth!" he said, "I should like that chance, but I can't take it. I'm working every day in the M. M. C. That's what I've been doing ever since Uncle Eben went away, and I've got to keep right on with it."

For a minute Alice was quite taken aback. "Why, Lex," she said, "is it really necessary for you to work out there while Mr. Cornforth is gone?"

"It's because he's gone that I *must* work!" cried the boy. "You see, Miss Hildreth, the assessment for this year isn't worked out. Uncle Eben meant to do it this month—he's been working in one of Drayton's mines all the fall—but he'd only done a few days' work in the

M. M. C. when the letter came, and he dropped everything."

The girl's eyes widened with a sudden intelligence. In a flash she remembered the talk at the breakfast table on that morning of disappointment, and realized just the danger which threatened the old prospector's claim. "Oh, dear me!" she said, and then she dropped her hands at her sides, and looked at Lex with a blank dismay. But even with this light on the situation she still could not quite see the need of his self-denying resolution.

"But, Lex," she cried, "you can't do all that work alone, can you?"

"No," said the boy; "I only wish I could. But my work counts for half as much as a man's,—that's what Drayton paid me when I was working for him last spring,—and all I do will lessen the amount that's left for him to do when he gets back."

"But if he shouldn't get back at all!"

The boy's face darkened and his hand tightened on the arm of the chair. "Then my work wouldn't hold the claim," he said slowly. "But I believe he will get back. Anyhow, I'm going to do all I can and take the chances."

Perhaps he feared she might think him ungrateful in thus rejecting the plan which had been so generously made for him, for after a moment he said earnestly,—

"You wouldn't wonder at the way I feel about this, Miss Hildreth, if you knew all he's done for me. He took me in after my own folks died, when I was only a little chap, with nobody in the world to look after me, and he's stood by me through thick and thin ever since. He's given up chances on account of me, that might have been a fortune to him, and I wouldn't fail him now, when there's a chance of doing some-

thing for him, for anything in the world."

"Oh, and I wouldn't have you, Lex!" cried Alice. Her own heart was too loyal in its affections, too instantly responsive to the sense of duty, to fail to appreciate the boy's feeling in this matter, and there was complete sympathy in her voice as she said, "I didn't understand it before, but now that I do, I see that you couldn't possibly take any other course. I couldn't myself if I were in your place." She was silent a moment, then added, "I suppose he knows what you're doing."

His face had brightened as she spoke, but he shook his head at the last words. "No, we didn't have any talk about the work," he said. "It seemed as if he couldn't think of anything but little Mary after that letter came. I did start to say something once, but all he said was, 'If

she gets better, I'll be back in time, and if she don't—' he didn't finish it out, but I guess he meant it wouldn't make much difference to him then, one way or another."

His voice, which had been so strong and confident, trembled, and for the first time there was a note of despondency in it as he added, "If I only knew he'd get back! Sometimes I get awfully worried thinking about the work all by myself."

It was Alice's turn to be confident now. "But you mustn't worry, Lex!" she said. "I'm sure things will come out right. Why, they always come out right when we do our duty, as you are doing yours."

She little knew how this faith of hers would be tested in the days that were coming, but in the strength of it now her face was all aglow with hope and

courage, and the look in her eyes might have driven fear from an older and more doubtful soul than the boy's.

"I'm afraid you make too much of my part in it," he said, "but I shall remember that you believe that things will come out right if I do my best."

There was a little more talk between them, and then Alice went to find Mrs. St. Cloud, for she wanted to set the case in its true light, and prevent that warm-hearted lady from urging her invitation farther. But this was not as easy as she had thought. Mrs. St. Cloud was not prepared to accept the girl's view of the matter, and indeed was somewhat exasperated that she had so quickly adopted it.

It was not at all likely, she said, that Eben Cornforth would get back in time to accomplish any work; it was by no means certain that anybody would try

to re-locate his claim if he didn't; and it was most doubtful of all whether there was anything of value in it, when all was said. But if there were, she demanded, reaching her climax with positive heat, what was the best mine in the world worth compared with the safety and advantage of a boy like Lex Flemming?

She was not to be dissuaded from arguing the matter with him herself, but in this she gained nothing, and she gave it up at last with a fairly good grace.

"Well, Alexander Flemming," she said, with a show of dignity, "I think you're a very obstinate boy, and it's no use to argue with you any more. You'll take your own way, I suppose, and though it isn't my way, and I don't like it the least bit, I'm free to say I don't like *you* any the less for taking it."

The dignity was all gone with the last

words, and to show her complete goodwill she gave him at parting a basket filled with the best stores of the pantry. "Just to help out the bacon and flap-jacks, you know," she said, and she added with a smile, "If you should change your mind about coming here when you see how good our mince pies are, just remember that the invitation stands."

He went off in the best of spirits, but it was really a pity he had not stayed a little longer, for he might have heard a piece of news of more interest to him, perhaps, than to any other person, except one, in the camp. Mr. St. Cloud had learned it a little ahead of the general knowledge, and brought it with him when he came home to supper.

It seemed that Mr. Dudley Drayton was "in luck again." Word had just been brought to him of a rich find in the Nonesuch, one of his outlying mines ;

the exact size of it was not yet known — Drayton had gone out to investigate; but if report said true, he had struck a “bonanza,” and no mistake.

In answer to a question from his wife, Mr. St. Cloud explained that the Nonesuch was located about three miles north of town, on the farther side of Ben Doon.

“Why, that’s the very mine that Mr. Cornforth has been working in this fall, and it’s close by the M. M. C.!” exclaimed Alice.

Mr. St. Cloud said he believed so, but this evidently did not add to his interest in the matter. To Alice, however, it brought a thrill of genuine excitement. Her first delighted thought was that this discovery in the Nonesuch was an omen of good to Eben Cornforth’s claim, and then it occurred to her that there was more danger than before of his losing

it if there was any flaw in his title at the end of the year. She could hardly think of anything else all the evening, and she wondered constantly how Lex would feel when he knew it. One thing was certain: he would be more bent than ever on doing his utmost at that assessment work.

CHAPTER IV.

LEX MAKES A THIRD AT AN INTERESTING
CONFERENCE.

MEANWHILE Lex was steadily pushing his way towards home. There were no long swift runs to be made now by the aid of his snow-shoes. It was an uphill journey all the way and could only be taken step by step. Still the distance did not seem long to him. He was a strong, stout-hearted lad, and he whistled blithely as he went higher and higher into the rugged whiteness, pausing now and then to give a shout of greeting to some miner at his door, or to send a mocking answer to the cry of a coyote lurking somewhere in the shadow of the pines.

The moon was rising behind the cabin when at last he reached it. It was such a cabin as one finds everywhere among the Rockies; set close against the mountain, indeed, partly within it, its sides formed of logs and clay and protected by a low, dirt-covered roof. But Eben Cornforth had a considerable spice of Yankee genius, and a dwelling built by him was sure to have more than the ordinary degree of mountain comfort. The window set in the front of this was larger than the average, the door fitted better and boasted a stout wooden latch. Inside, too, there were marks of contrivance. The stools, the shelves, the table swung with leather hinges to the side of the room, and the little camp-stove,—less picturesque than a fireplace of stones in the corner, but vastly more comfortable,—all spoke of a thrifty inhabitant.

The darkness and emptiness of the place threw a momentary gloom over the boy as he opened the door. Here, where the old prospector's voice had so often sounded in cheery welcome, the sense of his absence came most keenly. But a fire quickly lighted and blazing with a crackle, a candle twinkling on the table, and, above all, the contents of Mrs. St. Cloud's basket went far to banish the lonesome feeling. How good those pies and doughnuts were! If the giver could have seen the rate at which they disappeared, she would certainly have been convinced that her worst fears were true as to the starvation fare on which Lex had been living during his guardian's absence.

He was thinking of her now, and of Alice Hildreth, as he lay on the wolf-skin before the fire. Their hearty friendliness had more than paid him for



"SEATING HIMSELF AT THE TABLE, HE FELL TO WORK."

his trip to camp, though he had missed the letter which was the chief object of going. He wondered whether he had really expressed his appreciation of that generous invitation which they had urged so warmly. And then he thought a little sadly how pleasant it would have been if he could only have taken advantage of the little teacher's offer to help him in his studies. With that came another thought; the evenings were long and he had nothing to do; why not study his arithmetic by himself and surprise her at the end of the week with the progress he had made? The idea pleased him more and more as he considered it, and, springing to his feet at last with the basket still not wholly emptied, he took his arithmetic and slate from the shelf, and, seating himself at the table, fell to work. He had a faculty for figures, an "oncommon

good head," as the old prospector sometimes admiringly declared, and now, in the glow of his resolution, he worked swiftly and with no thought of the passing time.

It was the dulness of his pencil, and the discovery of the fact that his knife was missing, which gave sudden pause to his interest. To a boy in his situation the loss of a good jack-knife seemed nothing short of a calamity, and when he had hunted in every pocket, and made a rapid search through the room without finding it, Lex looked exceedingly troubled. A vigorous racking of his memory, however, presently disclosed that he had used the knife in the mine a short time before starting for camp. He thought he knew the very spot where he must have left it, and with an impulse to recover it at once if possible, he seized his cap and a bit of candle

and hurried out of the cabin. The M. M. C. was only a few rods distant. He would make the search and return at once.

A minute, and he stood inside the rocky opening. Here he paused and lighted the candle, then took his way down the narrow tunnel till he came to an irregular opening in the left wall close to the top. It was the mouth of a small natural cave which the prospector had opened in the course of his work. Lex had been in it once before that day. It was here that he had used his knife in breaking a curious stalactite from the roof. He scrambled into it again now, and diving into one of its dark, low corners, peered around for his missing treasure. He had not been mistaken. There it was lying just as he had left it. He gave a whistle of joy at the sight and was putting it in

his pocket when he was startled suddenly by the sound of footsteps in the passage outside.

For a moment the glad thought crossed his mind that the old prospector had returned. He crept forward with a cry. Then the sound of voices in conversation reached him, and with a flashing conviction of his mistake, he blew out his candle, and crouching on the floor of the cave listened intently.

At first he could gather but little of the talk, for it was carried on in low tones, and accompanied frequently by the blows of a hammer which rang here and there against the rocky walls, but the boy was not slow in drawing his own conclusion as to this unexpected visit. These men, whoever they were, had come to make examination of the M. M. C. Probably they hoped to make the claim their own should the opportunity be theirs at

the end of the year. So much Lex guessed by the help of his fears; but when, listening strenuously, he caught the name of the Nonesuch, with allusions to the rich vein just opened, he saw an additional reason for this sudden interest in Eben Cornforth's claim.

Drawing close to the mouth of the cave, he placed himself in a better position for listening, just in time to hear the louder of the two voices exclaim: "Well, it may be the Old Gopher is on the right track this time. It really looks that way."

Lex did not recognize the voice, but he had no trouble in recognizing an allusion to Eben Cornforth under the title of "Old Gopher," a name frequently applied to prospectors who have distinguished themselves by making many and futile "holes in the ground."

"It does, for a fact," continued the same voice after a little pause filled with the

clinking sound of the hammer. "It's one of my mistakes that I didn't locate this myself. I had the chance before Cornforth did."

"Oh, well," said the other voice, in lower, fuller tones, which to the listener in the case suggested Mr. Dudleigh Drayton, — "oh, well, we'll do something towards correcting that mistake very soon now, unless the Old Gopher, as you call him, takes very positive means to prevent."

"Well, if he means to do it, he'll have to get back here pretty quick," returned the other. "It's just as I expected; his assessment isn't half worked out. I know how much was done when he quit work last year, and he's only done a little drifting since then."

"I kept him at work for me till a couple of weeks ago," remarked Mr. Drayton (Lex was sure now that he was indeed the speaker); "but I can't say I had this in

view," he added, as if candor compelled him to admit that the result was not due to his own clever designing.

"That's just Cornforth's luck," grunted his companion. "He never sees where his own advantage lies in time to take it."

"His talents don't run in that line," returned Mr. Drayton; "but when it comes to hard work, why, Cornforth has a gift of no mean order. For driving a tunnel on a contract I don't know any man his equal. You can always depend on him to stand by his job, and do it just as he agrees to."

"Oh, Cornforth has a gift for being 'poor but honest'; there's no denying that," said the other, dryly. "We can't all of us expect to have the same gift, eh, Drayton?"

There was no audible response to this; but after a moment Mr. Drayton remarked: "I suppose there's just a chance of Cornforth's getting back in time to do some-

thing more at this. He was very much impressed with the importance of driving work here a little while ago, and threw up a steady job with me for the sake of getting at it."

"Yes, that was his notion then," replied the other, "but it doesn't count. If his girl is sick, he won't leave Redridge in a hurry. Besides, he's got a claim over there, and most likely he'll stay and work on that. These prospectors always have a lot of claims scattered up and down the country,—twice as many as they can look after. I'll warrant that if Cornforth doesn't hear of the Nonesuch,—and in this weather news doesn't travel fast,—he won't get back to Silvercrest in time for this."

There was a moment of silence. Then Mr. Drayton said, with a ripple of amusement in his low, quiet tones, "We were talking about re-locations at St. Cloud's

the other morning, and that little cousin of his said she thought it was awfully hard for a man to have his claim taken away from him, if he had *meant* to get all his work done. She seemed to be rather horrified at our New Year's business."

The remark was greeted with a resounding laugh. "Maybe they take the will for the deed in the country where she was raised," retorted Mr. Drayton's companion; "but out here a man's got to show his faith by his works and do it on time or get left. 'It's every man for himself and the Devil take the hindmost.'"

"Oh, for that matter," said Mr. Drayton, coolly, "we don't look out for our own advantage any more sharply here than they do back East. With us the stakes run higher, and call for quicker play, that's all."

His companion added something, with another laugh, but the words were lost to the listener in the cave. A minute later, when he knew that they had passed the mouth of his hiding-place without pausing, he crept still closer to it and peered eagerly after them. They were standing together at the farther end of the tunnel, and as the light of their candles fell on their half-turned faces, Lex saw them both distinctly. Mr. Drayton's companion, as he had already guessed, was a mining expert much in the employ of the other gentleman. He had broken a fragment from the wall, and was examining it with close attention.

"Cornforth has been following a blind lead," he said at length. "He hasn't cut the true vein, but in the light of the Nonesuch it looks a good deal as if he was getting near it. He was brag-

ging the last time I saw him about the showing here, and he wasn't altogether wrong. For that matter he has more sense than most of the prospectors. He knows a 'hawk from a handsaw' when he sees it."

He crumbled the lump of dark earth in his hand as he spoke and threw it from him, then brought his candle to bear more closely on the wall itself, scanning the marks of labor on it sharply. "It looks as if some one had been working here just lately," he said, in a puzzled tone.

Then his eye was caught by Lex Flemming's pick which lay on the floor near him, beside a little heap of rock and earth. It was a lighter pick than that generally used by miners, and after looking at it an instant he remarked, "If there is anybody at work, it must be the boy. Perhaps that's the way he

amuses himself while the old man's gone."

If the speaker had turned at that moment, he might have caught a glimpse of the boy to whom he had referred so lightly, his white face framed in the opening of the wall, and his eyes blazing through the darkness like those of some hunted animal. When he did turn, there was nothing to be seen. Lex, aware that the men were about to retrace their steps, had crept into the farthest recess of the cave, behind an angle of its jagged wall.

He had not done it too soon. A moment later he heard Mr. Drayton exclaim, "What's this? Have they been blasting out up here?"

He was standing before the mouth of the cave, stretching himself up and peering in with an expression of curiosity.

"Oh, that's a natural cave," replied his companion, coming up behind him, and looking for an instant over his shoulder. "They open up sometimes in these limestone deposits. There's another of the same sort in the Little Polly, over at Bedrock. Cornforth told me about this last winter, and I looked through it then. There's nothing in it. Do you want to go through?"

"No, thank you," said Mr. Drayton. "I'll take your word for it."

He had no fancy for bending his neck and crawling about in dark places unless there was something to be gained by it, something which in his practical mind took the shape of probable business advantage. For another moment the light of his candle shone on the glistening roof of the strange little room; then he turned away and left it once more to darkness and the boy.

Till the last echoing footstep had died away Lex kept his place, scarcely daring to breathe, and motionless as the wall beside him; then, with a fast-beating heart, he crept to the mouth of the cave and let himself down to the floor of the tunnel. The moonlight made a shining path through the open door, and hurrying towards it he looked eagerly out. At a little distance, climbing the hill, with their faces towards the Nonesuch, he could see his late visitors; then, fearful lest with some backward glance they might still discover him, he shrank once more out of sight.

And then, for a few short moments, his heart swelled with an exulting sense of triumph. He knew the secret of these men, but they did not know his. They did not guess that their words had fallen into the ear of one who would do his utmost to thwart them.

His utmost! Ah, the thought came next, like a rushing wave, sweeping away the poor brief sense of triumph, that the utmost he could do was all too little against this impending danger. It was the danger he had foreseen from the first, but it wore a new look to him now in the sudden and definite shape it had just assumed. If Eben Cornforth should not come back in time! The cold sweat started on the boy's forehead as he faced the thought. It seemed to him he *could* not stand by and see the fortune for which the old man had toiled so long slip from his hand into the grasp of others.

For there was a fortune, there must be a fortune, in the M. M. C., since Dudley Drayton wished to possess it! Perhaps no other fact could have meant so much to Lex Flemming. And then his thoughts turned with a sudden fierce-

ness upon Drayton himself. Till now this man had been a hero to the boy. He had gloried in his large successes and offered him a shy devotion, but the feeling was swept away in a tide of swift revulsion. He felt that he hated the shrewd, prosperous man, and he longed for the power to defeat and defy him.

And then, in the midst of his anger and bitterness, like the touch of some quieting angel, came the thought of Alice Hildreth and the memory of words she had spoken only a few hours before. He wondered what she would say to *this*,—she, who had been so sure that all must come right if only he did his duty steady and true. If she would say it again with that same look in her eyes, it seemed to Lex that he could believe it still, in spite of Dudleigh Drayton and the world.

With slow steps he walked back to the cabin. His arithmetic was lying open on the table, but there was no interest for him now in its pages. The only problem that he cared to solve was this of the M. M. C.

Presently he threw himself on the bunk in the corner, with its bed of pine needles and blankets, and, troubled as he was, he was soon asleep.

CHAPTER V.

IN LEAGUE FOR DEFENCE.

WHEN Lex woke the next morning, the sun, an hour high, was shining in at the window of the little cabin. He started to his feet and, for a moment, wondered whether his experience of the night before had not been all a dream. But a very little wide-awake reflection convinced him of its reality, and brought back the anxiety in which he had fallen asleep. He made a hasty breakfast and then started for the Nonesuch; for he could not set himself to his ordinary work till he knew what the discovery was which had so soon brought its influence to bear on the M. M. C.

The Nonesuch was a comparatively new property. Not much money had been spent as yet either on buildings or machinery, and only a few men were employed in the work. This morning, however, its brightening fortunes were already apparent. Mr. Drayton and the foreman were standing by the ore-house as he approached, evidently laying plans for its enlargement. Neither of them observed him, and he, holding his head a little higher than usual, passed directly to the entrance of the mine. This was not a tunnel like that of the M. M. C., but a shaft descending straight into the mountain. A moment later, after a quick descent in an ore-bucket, he stood among the workmen at the bottom. They were old acquaintances and willing enough to detail the news of yesterday.

"It's a three-foot vein of the best ore in these diggin's," said one of them,

"and if it don't boom everything on this hill come spring, I'm a tenderfoot. We got onto it about noon yesterday, and you can bet your life all hands were glad of the change. We've been breaking our drills for the last month on the hardest piece of granite that was ever stuck in the way of a tunnel, and the boss himself was getting sick of the job. 'If we don't get through this before long, boys, we'll try it on another tack,' says he, yesterday morning, and it wasn't six hours afterwards that we broke into this. I put in the shot myself that did the business."

He turned again to his work with the remark, "I reckon you'll be looking for something of this sort in the M. M. C. Old Hopeful will think he's got a sure thing now."

"Oh, we've known that from away back," said the boy, coolly; but he did

not wait for further conversation. He did not want to be asked any questions about the state of the work, or the time when he expected Eben Cornforth home.

As he turned, he came face to face with Mr. Drayton, who had descended the shaft during the talk. "Good morning, Lex," said that gentleman, cheerfully. "Are you looking for a job? If you are, we'll take you on right away. We need more hands in here."

There was a heartiness in his manner to which the boy gave no response. An angry flush had risen in his face. "I don't want any job but the one I've got," he said stiffly. "I'm putting all my time on the M. M. C."

Mr. Drayton raised his eyebrows slightly. "Oh, then you have your hands full," he said; and in another moment the two had passed.

That day Lex worked as he had never worked before. One watching him might have wondered what prize had been offered for the strokes which fell from his pick so hard and fast. It seemed to the boy himself that new power had been given to his arms, but there were moments when his heart grew faint under the bitter question, Was it for the man he loved that he was spending his strength, or would it in the end turn only to the advantage of his enemy?

As the day wore on, and weariness came, his doubts grew deeper, and the longing to talk his trouble over with some friend took strong possession of him. It seemed to him he could not bear this thing alone, and with the feeling came more and more often the thought of Alice Hildreth. She was only a girl; she could not help him.

He said it to himself over and over, but the remembrance of her sympathy brought insistently back the desire to see her and tell her all his anxiety. It would be worth something just to know that she cared.

With steady patience he finished his day's work; then, when all the world was growing dark, without as well as within the tunnel, he left the place. Supper and a visit to the snares he had set among the pines held him for another hour. A present of game for Mrs. St. Cloud would be a fine excuse for the visit, he said to himself, and the luck which awaited him in the shape of a splendid pair of "snowshoe rabbits" seemed a good omen. The trip to camp in the keen bracing air helped to raise his spirits, and when Alice Hildreth met him at the cottage door there was nothing in his face to suggest that anxiety was the cause of his coming.

She was alone in the house with Tommy, and the welcome they both gave him might have lightened a heavier heart than his.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come, Lex," said the child, "for papa and mamma have gone out for all this evening, and I'm to sit up as long as I please with Cousin Alice, and she's going to tell me stories. I guess she'll let you hear them, too."

The girl sent a rather rueful look at her visitor. Now he had come she would have liked to put her charge to bed, but Lex smiled good-naturedly at Tommy. After the strain of the last twenty-four hours it was a relief to think of something besides work and trouble, and for his talk with Alice he could wait. There was sure to be a chance by and by.

But the story-telling was quickly made over to him, and the theme, rabbits, was one on which he was extremely well

posted. He told his eager young listener all about the beautiful pair he had brought, how they changed the gray coats they had worn in summer for white ones when the hills put on their winter covering, and how they gained their peculiar name from their broad, flattened feet so well adapted to travel on the fields of snow. It was not as easy to find them about Silvercrest now as it had been once, for their race had suffered in the long blockades when people hunted them in every corner to eke out their slender store of provisions. All this, with tales of his own fortune in many a rabbit hunt, Lex told in answer to the child's swift questions; but the little fellow's eyes grew sleepy at last, and the promise that some day he should himself go hunting with Lex sent him amiably off to bed.

And now it was time for that other story, the story which was for Alice's ear

alone. The boy did not wait when his opportunity came. "Miss Hildreth," he began, with a look of trouble on his bright face, which had not been there before, "I came down to-night on purpose to tell you something. I don't know as I ought to bother you with it, but it seems as if I must tell somebody, and you've been so good to me and Uncle Eben. Things look worse than they did for the M. M. C. Something's happened since I was here yesterday."

"You mean the strike in the Nonesuch?" cried Alice. "Oh, I thought of you when I first heard of that."

"Yes, the Nonesuch is at the bottom of it," said the boy. "You see they've made a great find in there, and that can't help meaning something to us, we're so close to it. Of course it would be the best kind of luck for us if it wasn't for the way our assessment work stands, but now —"

He paused an instant, and Alice exclaimed: "That's just what I was afraid of! You think *now* there's more danger than before, that people will try to get it away from you."

"I don't '*think*,' I know it," cried the boy. "They were in there last night, Drayton and Kempton, and they make sure of getting it when the new year comes."

He told his story now with flashing eyes and tense, nervous voice, repeating the conversation he had overheard, and not omitting the allusion to her nor the opinion which had been ventured as to the way in which he amused himself. It was a climax of excitement at which his listener's cheeks grew pale when he told how these men had stopped at the mouth of his hiding-place, within the very sound of his smothered breathing, and turned away again all unconscious of his presence.

"They said there was nothing in there, but I was there," he ended bitterly. "Maybe I don't count for anything, but if I could only spoil their game!"

He stopped with his lips drawn hard, and for an instant Alice could not speak. She had listened to this story with her heart swelling as if it would burst. To her these midnight visitors seemed no better than plotting robbers, the worst of robbers indeed, since they would take advantage of the old man's absence to rob him of his treasure.

"Oh, Lex," she cried, starting to her feet, "what can we do? We *must* do something to stop them."

If she had poured out a torrent of sympathy, it would not have meant as much to Lex as that little word "we." It filled him with a quick, sweet sense of companionship in his trouble. He lifted

his eyes gratefully to hers, but shook his head as he answered slowly, —

“I can’t see any sure way out of it unless he gets back in time. I wrote him a letter this morning, and when he gets it he’ll know how things stand. But he may miss of getting it; and if she’s worse, he won’t pay any attention to it; I know that. If I could only get somebody to work in his place, it would fix everything, but there’s the trouble.”

“Why, there must be plenty of men about here,” cried Alice, catching at this new idea.

“Not so many as there were a while back,” said Lex. “It’s the worst time in the year to get help in a place like this. The prospectors are mostly working out their own assessments, — we’re not the only ones in the lurch, — and the rest, that are good for anything, have got some job for the winter. Still,

there'd be a chance for me if I only had the money to pay, but Uncle Eben didn't leave me any to speak of. He wasn't caring about the work, anyway, and I suppose he thought he might need all he had for her."

The light of a sudden hope had kindled in the girl's blue eyes. Was it a question of money, then? "Oh!" she cried, and then, with her breath coming quick, "How much would it take?"

"Let me see," said the boy. "Uncle Eben had put in five days' work when he went away, and at three dollars a day—" He paused, but Alice's thought leaped to the end of the calculation quicker than his.

"Then eighty-five dollars would pay for the work that's left to be done?" she asked.

"Oh, fifty would cover it," said the boy, "for there's all my work. But there's

no use talking of money," he added, almost impatiently. "I haven't got five dollars, not to speak of fifty."

"Yes, you have, Lex," said Alice, leaning forward and laying both her hands on his. "Yes, you have, for I've got it, and it shall be your own for this."

He looked at her in such utter astonishment, that she repeated more slowly. "I tell you it is *yours*, yours to use for him on this work in the M. M. C. I only need enough money to get home, and I have a great deal more than that, for the St. Clouds wouldn't take a cent for my board. Oh, I feel as if I had been earning it for this very purpose."

The tears rushed into the eyes of the boy. "Oh, Miss Hildreth," he began, but she would not let him finish.

"No, no, don't thank me," she said. "Don't say a word. Oh, if you knew how glad I am to do it! Why, I'm the

one to be grateful myself for having such a chance."

He turned his face away for a moment, and the tears came faster than before. Was ever another friend who gave help like the little teacher?

"*He'll* thank you," he said at last, in a broken voice. "And he'll pay you back, too. Nobody ever lost a dollar by him. But if anything should happen that he couldn't, I'll pay you myself with the very first money I earn."

"The pay I want is the right to feel that I've helped him," she cried. "Oh, if his fortune should come after all these years, and you and I had helped to bring it!" She clasped her hands in a transport of happiness. Then, with a sudden anxiety, queried, "But are you perfectly sure you can get somebody?"

"I'll rustle round pretty lively, and see if I can't," said the boy. There was a

new note of courage in his voice. He dropped his head with the air of one thinking intently, and she, seeing his pre-occupation, was silent, too. In the stillness of her thoughts she reviewed the rather startling step she had just taken, but without the slightest misgiving. She was a New England girl, trained to the most careful use of money, but she felt sure that every member of the household at home would approve her action in this matter. She could hear her father say in his hearty voice, "You did right, my child; you did right." And she could see her mother turn her face away lest the smile of tender approval in her eyes should melt too quickly into tears. She started when Lex spoke again, and from the home scene which had risen so vividly before her brought back her thoughts to the scene which was passing here.

"I think my best way would be to try

to get one of the Glynnns," he said. "There's two brothers of them, and they are working on their own claim, the Lonely. They're Cornishmen, and sharp after the money, but first-rate miners and the kind you can tie to. Jerry was in for supplies three weeks ago, and I heard him telling that they were about through with their assessment then."

The details of this plan shaped themselves as he spoke, and he added, "I'll start out for him by daylight to-morrow. It's a big trip to the Lonely, and up-grade most all the way, but that makes it down hill coming back, and if he agrees, we may get in again by night. I guess he will; I'll tell him I've got the money to pay."

"Yes, tell him that," said Alice; "but don't say a word about me. It's just the same as if Mr. Cornforth had left it. Hadn't I better get the money now?" she added, rising.

"No, we don't have to pay in advance, and if anything should happen to me on the way, 'twould be lost, you know," said the boy. "I'd rather wait till I get back." He said the words so lightly that they scarcely made an impression on her thought.

"All right," she said, "I'm ready whenever you are." And then she added earnestly, "But you must be sure to come and see me as soon as you get back; I shall be so anxious to know whether you succeed."

"I'll report, if I can, to-morrow night, or at any rate by noon the next day," he said. "You shall hear from me within thirty-six hours."

He rose as he spoke, and put out his hand as if to seal the promise. For a moment they stood looking into each other's eyes like two children with a secret between them, and a boundless

trust, each in the heart of the other. Then Lex said, "I must be getting home now, if I'm to make that trip in good shape to-morrow."

She did not try to detain him. They said good night a few minutes later, and the boy passed out of the cottage; but when he had crossed the threshold he turned back to say, with his heart in his voice, —

"There's nobody but you that would have done it, Miss Hildreth, and we'll never forget it of you, Uncle Eben and I, never."

He choked as he said the last word, then, with another good night, he was off.

Till his swift, dark figure was out of sight, Alice stood holding her lamp in the doorway, watching; and when she returned to her place by the fire her heart still followed him. Of the long, hard

journey he would undertake in the morning she took little thought. In fancy she saw him already returned, his errand crowned with success, and that success seemed to her eager hope the sure beginning of the better days for which the old prospector had waited so long and patiently.

When the St. Clouds came home, they found her still sitting by the fire, an unusual brightness in her eyes, and a soft, warm color in her cheeks. "So you stayed up for us, in spite of my telling you not to," said Mrs. St. Cloud, dropping into a chair beside her. "It was naughty, but I'm glad you did; for I can't wait to tell you about the entertainment we've planned for Christmas eve at the school-house. We want you to help us in getting up some tableaux."

"I'll do everything I can," said Alice, cordially. "I may be here myself to

share the fun when the evening comes, you know."

It was the first time she had ever admitted the possibility, but she did it cheerfully now. Her longing to go home was, for the time, quite swallowed up in the desire to see the end of this strange drama in which she had so suddenly become an actor.

Mrs. St. Cloud brought her hands together with a soft little clap, and her husband gave his cousin a smile of peculiar approval.

"You're a sensible girl, Alice," he said. "I knew you were made of the right sort of stuff when I brought you up here."

For a moment, in the glow of pleasure which his words gave her, Alice felt that she would like to tell him everything which had passed that evening between herself and Lex, but a moment's hesitation killed the impulse. She remembered

too well the impatience he had once expressed towards mining men who allowed their claims to go unworked till the last month of the year, to feel that he would have any sympathy with Eben Cornforth in the danger that now threatened his property, and it was not easy to speak of the assistance which she herself had promised. That it was best to do what she had done, incomparably best, was one of the things likely to be hidden from a man as wise and prudent as Mr. John St. Cloud. Nevertheless, she felt a little guilty in keeping her secret, and she paid for it by the blush with which she presently said that she had had a visit from Lex Flemming that evening, and that he had brought a pair of rabbits for Mrs. St. Cloud.

“Oh, how nice of him!” exclaimed the lady. “I’ve been wishing for a week that we could have a rabbit pie.” Then,

with a quick note of inquiry in her voice, "Perhaps he's beginning to think better of staying with us? I hope you urged the invitation."

Alice laughed. If Mrs. St. Cloud only knew how far such suggestion had been from their talk that evening! "He'll not change his mind about that," she said decidedly. "He's not thinking of anything now but the work in the M. M. C."

"Well, he *ought* to change his mind," replied Mrs. St. Cloud, and she appealed the question to her husband, whether it were not the height of folly for Lex to refuse a comfortable home in his guardian's absence for the sake of standing by the M. M. C., as he called it.

Mr. St. Cloud was moving from the room, looking rather sleepy. "Well, I guess his standing by the M. M. C. won't make much difference one way or an-

other," he said; "but let him do as he pleases. Most likely he's shy about coming here. I was shy myself at his age."

Mrs. St. Cloud looked as if she rather doubted the statement, but she only said, with a shake of her head, that if Lex came to grief in his lonesome life, it would not be *her* fault, but rather the fault of those who had not helped her to overcome his scruples.

Alice's only response to this was a radiant smile. There was no room in her happy heart to-night for the fear that any harm would come to Lex in acting the unselfish part he had chosen.

CHAPTER VI.

WAITING FOR TIDINGS.

IT was a dull, gray world to which Alice woke on the morning after that visit from Lex. The tops of the mountains were all lost in banks of dubious-looking clouds, and there was a chilly dampness in the air which suggested more snow.

“Oh, why couldn’t it have been pleasant just for to-day!” thought the girl. It seemed to her that Nature ought to have lent her brightest skies to aid the boy on his tedious journey, and she went down to breakfast in a depressed and rather resentful state of mind.

The conversation at table did not tend to raise her spirits. Mr. St. Cloud began it by a casual remark about the

mail-carrier, who, it appeared, was expected to leave camp on his weekly trip that morning.

"Lyford's got a bad day for his job," he observed, with a glance out the window; "I shouldn't like to be in his shoes to-day."

Alice started. "You don't think he'll be in any special danger, do you?" she asked, with a troubled accent on the words.

"Oh, my dear," cried Mrs. St. Cloud, impatiently, "don't you know that people are always in 'special danger' when they go about among the mountains at this season? There are no end of things that may happen."

The danger to which her own thoughts had been most recently directed occurred to her at that moment, and for the girl's benefit she proceeded: "Why, Mrs. Hawley was telling us last night how her

brother was struck with snow-blindness going through Bailey's Basin the other day. He had been out all the morning with the snow in a perfect glare, and before he knew what was coming everything began to grow indistinct around him. It got worse and worse, till finally he couldn't see his hand before his face. He wandered around in the Basin for hours, and would have frozen to death if a couple of miners hadn't found him just at nightfall. He hasn't been able to bear a ray of light since, and the pain in his eyes is something fearful."

It was impossible to omit a single detail with a listener whose face showed such interest as Alice Hildreth's. The girl had grown fairly pale over the story. What if such a fate as this should befall Lex Flemming, with the possible difference that help should not reach him at all?

It was a relief when Mr. St. Cloud said in a careless tone, "Well, there's no danger of Lyford's going blind to-day. The last thing that's likely to trouble him is too much sunshine on the snow."

Alice sent him a grateful glance, but the comfort his words had given was snatched away in another moment. She had just time to draw a long breath before he added, "Of course the real danger a carrier has, on a day like this, is from slides. There's no getting rid of that, with the snow lying everywhere as heavy as it does now. The slightest thing may bring it down without a moment's warning."

"Oh, but surely people don't need to go through the places where there is such danger," cried Alice.

Mr. St. Cloud shook his head. "There are no safe paths among these

mountains for any long distances now," he said. "If a man has far to go, he's sure to have to strike through some skittish places. If he isn't willing to run his risk, and a pretty close one, too, he'd better stay at home in times like these."

"I don't think all the mail in Christendom is worth it," exclaimed Mrs. St. Cloud, "and yet," she added with a sigh, "it would be intolerable to live in a place like this without letters or papers."

"Of course it would," said her husband, "and somebody has to take the risk of bringing them in. After all, there's no use making such a horror of the business. There's a certain fascination in the very danger, and the fellow who goes in for it gets good pay with lots of glory to boot."

He glanced from his wife to Alice as he spoke, and half smiled at the distress

in her face. "Come, come," he said, giving her cheek a friendly pat. "I thought you were just the sort of girl to appreciate that kind of pluck. You're always telling Tommy about those old heroes who spent their time killing dragons and breaking each other's heads. You fairly smacked your lips yesterday when you read,—

"'Let me, this instant, rush into the fields,
And reap what glory life's short harvest yields.'

Well, that's just what your mail-carrier's doing, and I think you ought to hurrah for him as well as for those old adventurers."

She could not help smiling at this, but with a quivery sort of smile. To admire heroism in the abstract was one thing, but to think calmly of Lex Flemming pushing his way through the awful dangers of these mountains was

distinctly another. "I don't think I ever quite realized before about these snow-slides," she said, in a low voice.

It really seemed as if Mrs. St. Cloud, with the kindest heart in the world, was set to make the girl miserable that morning. "Why, of course you've known about them, child," she said. "You read in the paper yourself how the gorges are all packed with rocks and timber that the slides have brought down, and how the men who are trying to open the road have to keep some one on the lookout all the time, for fear of other slides rushing down and burying them."

Yes, Alice had certainly read this and other facts not less pointed. She even remembered making a note of them as incidents likely to interest the friends at home who would want to know all about this strange, wild region in the heart of

the Rockies. But it seemed to her at this moment as if she were actually hearing of snow-slides for the first time, such new significance did the danger gain from the thought of Lex Flemming and his journey to the Lonely.

She was silent, looking so utterly dejected, that Mr. St. Cloud made haste to say, "Well, don't think any more about snow-slides, or snow-blindness, or any other of our little pleasantries up here. We won't any of us start out to-day. As for Lyford, he's no tenderfoot. He knows what he's got before him and he'll see himself through."

Far as he was from touching on the real point of the girl's anxiety, his words did give her a kind of relief. Lex, too, was "no tenderfoot." No doubt he knew what was before him when he decided on his journey to the Lonely. "If anything should happen to me on the way—"

She remembered the words now and how lightly he had said them. Those perils which had been so strangely absent from her thoughts had surely been present to him, a mountain lad and "to the manner born."

It was poor comfort, but all she had to cling to, and she made the best of it through that day. After all, there was no actual storm. The clouds hung stubbornly about the mountains and threw out occasional flurries of snow, but those were not serious enough to hinder any traveller long who had urgent business before him, as she gathered from Mr. St. Cloud, when, wincing a little, she referred again at dinner to the mission of the mail-carrier. This was worth something, and as night came on she could not help thinking that Lex might have accomplished his journey, and even now be drawing near with

the word he had promised to bring her.

But he did not come, and after a restless evening, her thoughts made a resolute rebound. She said to herself that she ought not to have looked for him at all. He had not himself expected to come to-night. "You shall hear from me within thirty-six hours;" that was his promise, and she must bide his time with patience.

For a while the next morning it was not hard to keep her resolution. The sun shone as it only shines in Colorado in December, making the mountains glisten as if all the gold and silver in their cold, dark bosoms had been drawn forth by some enchanter's wand and spread in burnished sheets upon their sides. The air was as mild as the air of October, and the whole camp seemed bestirring itself to a new and cheerful life.

"He'll certainly come this morning," Alice said to herself, and with more success than on the previous day she tried to throw herself into the interests of those around her. Mrs. St. Cloud was busy with preparations for a luncheon party, and to help her in the making of various dainties, to "set the house to rights," and add the thousand touches that always seem needed when company is coming, were welcome occupations. But more and more often as the day wore on, Alice stole to the window and sent a wistful glance down the street. The thirty-six hours were passing, they had almost passed, and still there was no sign of Lex. Noon came without him; the afternoon sped on its way, but did not bring him; and now an anxiety which could neither be dismissed nor argued down took possession of the poor little watcher. Was it possible

that he had forgotten, and was already back at his post in the M. M. C.? No, the memory of his look as he gave her his promise made it easier to believe anything than *that*.

If she could have seen her cousin, she would certainly have confided in him now. But Mr. St. Cloud did not come home to his usual meal, and Mrs. St. Cloud was too much engrossed with company to be burdened with an anxiety which she would feel so keenly. There was nothing for the girl to do but to keep her secret in the silence of her own thoughts, with a desperate effort not to show her uneasiness too plainly.

But her face was too transparent to conceal her feelings. Her paleness was a subject for exasperating sympathy on the part of the visiting ladies, and more than one, rallying her on her supposed homesickness, ventured the cheerful prediction

that the blockade was really drawing to a close, and she would soon be free to start for home. As if she cared for *that* now! As if she cared for anything in the whole wide world except to get tidings of Lex and to know that he was safe!

She slipped away at last from all the talk, and in sheer desperation stole out of the cottage. It seemed to her she could bear her suspense better in the open air. A fairly well-beaten path led through the camp, and she followed it, not caring where she went, while her eyes moved restlessly along the edges of the mountains and her thoughts brooded over the one absorbing question, what had become of Lex. If any harm had befallen him, she felt that she could never forgive herself for the part she had borne in starting him on his perilous mission.

The path ended at last in depths of unbroken snow, and facing about she



"THERE WAS A GROUP OF THEM AROUND A
RUSTY OLD STOVE."

slowly retraced her steps. As she passed the chief store of the place, a wish that Mrs. St. Cloud had expressed that day for some small article of household use came suddenly to her remembrance, and half mechanically she opened the door.

The store, which was devoted impartially to dry-goods and groceries, was in the same room with the post-office, and, as the girl remembered when she had stepped inside, was a favorite gathering-place for idlers. There was a group of them now around a rusty old stove at the further end of the room, one of them engrossed in the latest copy of *The Mountain Blast*, and the others intent on a game of checkers, which two of their number were playing as they sat on a couple of upright soap-boxes.

They all glanced up as she entered and gave her respectful nods of recognition. For a few moments their desultory con-

versation dropped; then it was resumed, and Alice, waiting at the counter while the clerk supplied another customer, listened almost unconsciously.

"Well, it looks as if we were getting somewhere near the end of this blockade," said the man who had been reading the paper. "We're bound to have an open road in a few days now, if there warn't but ten miles between our men and the Sandville gang day before yesterday."

"Ten miles is a good deal of road to clear," returned one of the group, in a less cheerful tone, "when there's as much snow on it as there is now; specially when more's liable to come down any time on top o' that."

"Well, there hain't been much coming down for the last two days," returned the other. "All we need, to put the business through, is a little more of

such weather as we've had to-day, and for my part, I b'lieve we're going to get it. It's an off year for long blockades, or all the old-time reckoning fails. What's the use of being shut in for a month last winter, if it don't make us any safer for this?"

The other sniffed contemptuously. Evidently he was no great believer in the law of compensation. "The old-time reckoning ain't so powerful long," he retorted. "'Cordin' to what the Utes tell there's been longer blockades in this valley than any *we've* seen, and there warn't any two years between 'em neither."

"Don't quote the Utes to me," returned the man of the newspaper, with his cheerfulness still unimpaired. "I've got no use for Injuns. I say we've got to get rid of 'em. There's no protecting ourselves against their tales of what

happened before the memory of the Fifty-niners."

There was a laugh at this, and the pessimist, now fully roused to the necessity of defending his gloomy views, exclaimed: "You say we hain't had any snow to speak of for the last two days. I own we didn't get much *here* yesterday, but there's no knowing how much of a storm they had higher up the range. It won't surprise *me* any to hear from it."

What the cheerful man might have replied to this is not clear, for all attention was diverted at that moment by the opening of the door, and the entrance of a man who looked a much-worn and weather-beaten traveller.

At the sight of him there was a burst of exclamations: "Hullo, Sandy! Howdy? Where'd you come from?"

The traveller returned the greetings,

and moving towards the stove, with a long limping gait, spread out his hands to the warmth. "I come from Lone Rock yesterday, from Pine Notch to-day," he said hoarsely.

"I reckon you must be prospectin' fer a claim in the other world to be travellin' so fur across the mountings now," said one of the checker-players.

"Those that stay at home may strike at it afore I do," said the traveller, grimly. He looked from one to another of the group in significant silence before he asked, "Have any of you seen the Glynn boys lately?"

Alice Hildreth started, and, moving a step nearer to the circle about the fire, listened breathless.

"One of 'em was in fer supplies three weeks ago," said the checker-player. "They 'lowed then to stay out at the Lonely all winter."

"Wall, they ain't thar now," said the traveller, solemnly. "An' what's more, the cabin ain't thar neither."

He paused for a moment; then, with growing excitement in his manner, went on, "Thar's been a slide down the side o' the Blue Bonnet, and it's wiped off the Glynn boys' cabin slick 'n' clean. I've jest come from thar, an' I tell ye thar ain't so much as a splinter nor a dump-pile left. Thar ain't *nothing* left but the hole o' the Lonely with a great rock rolled afore it. I clum the rock, an' went in to look fer the boys, but they warn't thar. I reckon they went down with the wreck."

His voice sank to a whisper with the last words; then, clearing his throat, he continued, "I 'low it must have happened sometime yesterday, fer thar was right smart of a storm up that way. It was no one-horse slide, I can tell you.

I could see whar it started up above the bend. The ground was all tore up, and the pines had been snapped off like pipe-stems. I reckon ye wouldn't know the place, any of ye, but I staked a claim 'longside of the Lonely once, and I knowed it, like I'd know the old farm back in Posey County."

There was a strange pathos in the last words, coming as they did upon his wild description of the ruin which had been wrought so far from the home of his boyhood. His voice sank, and he dropped on the soap-box from which one of the checker-players had considerably risen.

There was a minute of silence. The gloomy-eyed man, who had expected to hear from the storm, looked round the group with lips significantly compressed. Then he said slowly, "I told Jerry Glynn 'twas resky staying out there this

winter, but he 'lowed they were safe enough."

"Safe!" ejaculated the traveller, with a short, hoarse laugh. "If thar's anybody safe in these mountains now, it's them that's under the snow already. My pardner 'n' I've been driving a tunnel in a claim we've got, over by the Gray Narrows, and the slides have been running mighty near us for the last few days. One missed us by a few rods last Sunday, an' the next day, jest as we were eating dinner, another came whooping down right above us. We jumped for the tunnel, and we didn't make it a bit too soon. The next minute the slide struck the cabin and carried it off, dinner 'n' all. Pard 'n' I thought 'twas about time for us to quit. We can stan' a middlin' amount o' snow, but when it comes to having slides fer steady diet, it takes away a man's appetite."

A grim smile passed round the group. Then, as if with common impulse, all arose.

"There ain't much time to lose if we're going to get the boys out to-night," said one, as they moved together towards the door.

"No," responded another; "but they'll never know we've done it, if they've been under the snow since yesterday."

In the pause which followed the slamming of the door it seemed to Alice Hildreth as if all the world had grown suddenly still, and all its hopes and interests had died utterly away. She was conscious of nothing except a sudden horror, a weight which like an avalanche itself seemed to have fallen upon and stopped the very beating of her heart. For a minute longer she stood motionless in her place, then turned her white face

towards the door, and without hearing the voice of the clerk, who told her that she had left her purchase on the counter, passed silently out.

CHAPTER VII.

NEWS, BUT NOT LEX.

WAS this the reason, then, that Lex had failed to keep his promise? Had he sacrificed his brave young life in the effort to save the M. M. C.?

The questions rushed upon her as she stood once more under the open sky. In the anguish of them she put her hands before her face, as if to shut out the sight of a world which dealt so cruelly with its children, and leaned with a sudden faintness against the door which she had managed to close behind her.

The next moment she heard her cousin's voice. He was passing at the instant with Mr. Drayton, and sprang to her side with a quick anxiety. "My dear

girl, what has happened?" he cried. "Are you ill?"

She tried to speak, but could only shake her head, and Mr. Drayton said in a low voice, "She has been hearing about that snow-slide."

"Oh!" exclaimed St. Cloud, accepting the explanation with an accent of relief. "Well, it's bad business, bad business, but you mustn't let it use you up like this." He looked at her white, drawn face, as if wondering that sympathy with strangers could carry her so far, then added soothingly, "There are almost miraculous escapes sometimes, and for that matter, it isn't absolutely certain that the men were there."

He took her on his arm and moved forward, glad to see that she brightened a little at the last words. After all, was it certain that Lex was there? That was the doubt at which her thoughts

clutched for the moment with a sudden hope. She would have spoken, but her cousin had turned to Mr. Drayton.

"I know where this cabin was," he said, with a sort of fierce impatience in his tone, "and the place was clearly unsafe. It's amazing that men should think of staying in such a spot for the winter."

"But the case is no unusual one," said Mr. Drayton, in his cool, even tones. "There are hundreds of such cabins scattered through these mountains. Men live in the track of the avalanche, and know they're doing it, rather than leave their claims for the season. And the single cabins are not the only ones in danger. There are mines like the Cyclone, and the Dare Devil, and the Happy-go-lucky, located with all their buildings in places just as unsafe. I got a letter the other day from a mining

engineer up at Cyclone. 'The slides are booming round here,' he writes. 'There's no knowing when one in the draw may pick us up. If you don't see me again —so long.'"

"That's it," said St. Cloud, with a nod. "That's a sample of the reckless spirit that seems to take possession of some people when they get into these mountains. It's time to put that kind of daring under bonds to common sense."

"And it's time too," said Mr. Drayton, speaking with more emphasis than he commonly used, "for men who invest large sums in property out here to take the dangers of this country into full consideration. There's been too much haste and too little caution in the setting up of some of our best plants here in the San Juan. I tell you the whole question of protection against snow-slides in this region has yet to be fairly grappled with.

There's no need of having lives lost and thousands of dollars' worth of property smashed up every winter if sufficient measures were taken to prevent. Of course such measures involve time and money, but sooner or later they have to be taken."

"No doubt of it," said St. Cloud, "but just now there's too much of a scramble getting out the almighty dollar for most people to think of anything else."

He had almost forgotten the immediate catastrophe in discussing the general danger. He remembered it again now, and his voice softened, as he said, with his eyes resting on the knot of men gathering down the street, "There'll be a large party going out to the Lonely. No matter how hardened our people become to the thought of danger for themselves, they're all sympathy when some poor fellow is actually caught."

He glanced at Alice, and her eyes met his at that moment with an imploring look. She could speak now, and with a great effort said, "Tell them — tell them, they must look for Lex Flemming too. He went out to the Lonely yesterday, and he hasn't come back."

Mr. St. Cloud stopped suddenly in his walk and looked at his cousin as if doubting whether he had heard her right. "Lex Flemming out there!" he ejaculated. "What on earth possessed the boy to go? This is serious business," he added, turning to Mr. Drayton.

"I should think so," said the latter. "Is it certain that he went, and that he hasn't come back?" he asked almost sharply, as he turned to Alice.

"He said he should go," she faltered. "And I think — oh, yes, I'm sure — that he hasn't come back. He would have come to see me if he had."

Mr. Drayton did not speak for a moment. The surprise in his face had given place to a look almost as grave as hers. Then he said quietly, "The men that go out must know this and make all possible search," and, lifting his hat slightly to the girl, he passed quickly down the street.

Mr. St. Cloud went on to the cottage with Alice. The guests were gone, and he told his wife briefly of the reported disaster. He did not allude to the possibility that Lex Flemming was involved in it. He left that for Alice, only saying as he laid his hand on her shoulder, that the girl was "a good deal cut up." She wasn't used to hearing of such things.

"The more pity that any of us are!" cried Mrs. St. Cloud. Her eyes filled with tears, and the resentment that was always smouldering in her heart against the land of her husband's adoption flamed

up in her voice as she added, "This is a cruel, cruel country! It isn't right that people should try to live here in the winter. It's well enough while summer lasts, but they ought to go away when winter comes — everybody ought to go away."

"Oh, not everybody, every winter," said her husband, rather beseechingly, "only those who live in unsafe places. The mines in these mountains will never be developed by people who only make summer work of it, Kitty."

"And if they never should be!" she cried, with the passion still in her voice. "The gold and silver might stay in the ground for all of me! I don't believe 'twas ever meant that men should spend their lives, burrowing like moles in the dark, for the sake of digging them out."

Mr. St. Cloud turned away, his lips shaping an inaudible whistle. There was

no arguing with a person who took this view of things, and he wondered, as he left the cottage, to what depths of melancholy his wife and cousin would plunge each other when left to themselves.

But the older lady was ready now to act the part of comforter. She had too tender a heart not to feel for one who was suffering from the shock even more than herself. Since she entered the house Alice had not spoken, but sat still in her hat and cloak, her hands clasped in her lap, and her face wearing a strained unnatural look that was dreadful to see.

"Don't take it so hard, dear," said Mrs. St. Cloud, sitting down beside her. "It's an awful thing to happen, perfectly awful; and I never can get used to it that people should be swept out of life in such a fearful way, but we must make the best of it. There have been worse cases than this, over and over. Thank

Heaven there were only two men this time, and probably neither of them had a family. Miners who live out in that way are almost always single men, with nobody nearer to them than their poor old mothers, who, most likely, lost sight of them long ago."

Her eyes filled again at the last words, but Alice's were still dry. "Oh," she said, in a strange, low voice, "it may be that there were *three* instead of two! It may be that Lex Flemming was there! He went out to see if he could get one of those men to help in the M. M. C., and he hasn't come back."

Mrs. St. Cloud lifted her hands with a cry. For a moment dismay held her speechless, then, with characteristic feeling, she burst out: "Oh, why didn't he stay here with us, as I wanted him to? I always knew that trouble would come of his living out there alone, with no-

body to look after him or know what he was doing."

The last words were like an arrow sent straight to the girl's heart. For a moment she drooped and shivered, then, feeling as if her very silence were falsehood, cried: "I knew he was going. He told me all about it the night he was here, and I—I thought it was best. I wanted him to go."

The tears came now in a flood, and throwing herself into Mrs. St. Cloud's arms she sobbed as if her heart would break.

There was a moment in which it was hard for Mrs. St. Cloud—hard as anything she had ever done—to keep silence. Then all the reproaches she might have uttered were swept away in one great wave of pity. With the simple impulse of motherly kindness she drew the girl closer in her arms and whispered: "There, there, cry all you want to, dear. But we

mustn't give up. I don't believe, I won't believe, that the worst has happened."

And indeed, after the first shock, her thoughts found an opening for hope which Alice had altogether missed. How could one feel sure that Lex had gone out at the time he intended? In the unfavorable weather of yesterday what more likely than that he had deferred his journey and started this morning instead? It certainly seemed possible, and for Mrs. St. Cloud's sake Alice would not question the hope, but over against it in her own thoughts stood the obstinate doubt whether any consideration for himself was likely to have weighed with Lex against the effort he was so eager to make.

The doubt, not the hope, was confirmed when Mr. St. Cloud came home to his supper. The most definite inquiries had been set on foot concerning Lex, and it had been positively learned, from a miner

who had chanced to see him, that the boy had crossed the camp equipped for a journey early on the previous morning. No one had heard of his return; he was not at the cabin, and the solution of his absence must certainly be looked for in the ruin at the Lonely.

That was a most distressful evening at the cottage. Mr. St. Cloud went back to his place at the mine, making some excuse for doing so in the absence of the foreman of the night shift, who had gone out with the rescuing party. Perhaps he was glad to escape from the gloom of his own household. His report had thrown Mrs. St. Cloud into the depths of despair, and only the effect on Tommy, who was wild with excitement, kept her from giving way to it completely. It was Alice, not she, who preserved any show of fortitude now. But it was an unspeakable relief to the girl when the coming in of neighbors

made it possible for her to slip away to her own room. They could sit and talk of the disaster with Mrs. St. Cloud, recalling the details of all like catastrophes which had occurred within their remembrance, but the misery of listening was beyond Alice's power to endure.

In the solitude of her own room she wept, she prayed, she paced the floor, recalling every word of that last interview with Lex, and wondering at the happiness which had thrilled her when she made her quick, glad offer of help. In place of it now there was only the torturing consciousness that but for that offered help he would not have undertaken his errand. For the errand itself she had no longer any thought or care. Again and again there came back to her Mrs. St. Cloud's impetuous question, what was the best mine in the world worth compared with a boy like Lex, and each time her heart

gave the answer with throbs of unutterable anguish, "Nothing — nothing — nothing."

She had gone to bed, but not to sleep, though it was long past midnight, when she heard Mr. St. Cloud's night-key in the door below. He had not expected to be back till morning. He had said he might have news of the Lonely when he came. Was it possible that he had brought it already?

She sprang up, threw on her dress, and with bare feet flew down the stairs and into the parlor behind him. Mrs. St. Cloud, who had not gone to bed at all, but had lain dozing on the lounge, had roused at his entrance. He looked from one to the other of their pale questioning faces, and gave the word for which he knew they were waiting, without an instant's delay.

"Not yet," he said. "They haven't

found him yet. But take courage. He was not with the Glynn boys when the slide came down."

The opening of a prison door never brought hope to a prisoner which was sweeter than that word to Alice. She could not stand for trembling, nor speak for the thankfulness which filled her at that moment. It was Mrs. St. Cloud who, in a pitying whisper, asked, "And the others? Was it all over with them?"

"Yes," said Mr. St. Cloud, "and it must have been over soon. Poor fellows, it's doubtful if they knew what killed them." He paused a moment, then added: "Our men made extraordinary time getting to the Lonely, but a party from the Silver Circle was there before them, and there was nothing left for them to do. Hank Johnson came in ahead of the others to bring the news. The rest are coming down with the bodies."

There was a little silence. Mrs. St. Cloud broke it by asking with a sudden shrillness: "But where is Lex Flemming, then? Where *can* he be if he wasn't at the Lonely?"

"I wish I knew," said her husband. "We're completely in the dark about him. But I suspect that he reached the Lonely after the slide came down, and then went farther in the hope of bringing help to the boys."

"But you said help had come!" cried his wife. "Didn't those men from the Silver Circle know anything about him?"

Mr. St. Cloud shook his head. "No," he said, "they have not heard of him. Word had reached them in another way."

"Then he is lost! He is certainly lost!" cried Mrs. St. Cloud. "Perhaps he has been buried in some other slide; perhaps—"

But her husband interrupted almost sternly. "Don't torture your imagination any more to-night. Take a little comfort, if you can, from the certainty that he escaped this particular slide." He turned towards Alice and added in a softer tone: "It's an old saying, little girl, and rather a dubious one, that no news is good news. There's at least this grain of wisdom in it, that in the absence of any tidings, we ought not easily to accept the worst. Go to bed now and try to sleep."

He turned her towards the door as he spoke, and with a whispered good night, she went quietly out. For a moment, in the relief which had come with freedom from that worst fear, her anxieties had seemed almost to take to themselves wings, but they came back to her now, a dark clamoring brood, which she could not still nor drive away.

But Alice was too young to spend an entire night in tears and watching. An hour later she had obeyed her cousin and fallen asleep. But in her dreams her thoughts still followed the boy. She was wandering up and down the mountains, searching for him through the waste of rock and snow, calling his name across dreadful chasms and under awful cliffs, but getting no answer, finding no sign.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MISSING BOY.

AND all this time where was Lex? To answer that question fully we must go back to the morning when he left the old prospector's cabin and set out on the journey to the Lonely. It did not lessen his ardor for the undertaking that the sky was unfriendly that morning. One older and more prudent than he might have questioned whether it would not be well to defer the errand till another day, but the suggestion did not occur to the boy. He made a hearty breakfast and equipped himself for his journey. With a piece of charcoal he blackened his under eyelids as a precaution against snow-blindness should the day grow bright, after all ;

put on his buckskin leggins; thrust his feet under the straps of his snow-shoes — narrow, well-seasoned boards of nearly twice his own length — took his pole in his hand and was off. In better spirits never traveller started.

He passed through the camp before its inmates were fairly astir, only pausing once for a long, grateful look at the cottage where the little teacher lay asleep, and then began his toilsome ascent towards the Lonely.

The claim lay high up on the side of the Blue Bonnet, one of the many peaks which stood crowded in the neighborhood of Silvercrest. It had taken its name in the early days from some fancied resemblance it bore to the old-fashioned poke bonnets once in vogue among matrons in the East. It was gray, not blue, this morning, and its outlines were hidden by the clouds which shifted uneasily around

them. Into the midst of them Lex soon made his way. He had his pocket compass with him, but he did not need it now. He knew his course and followed it, higher and still higher across the rugged slopes, his courage never failing nor the strength of his stout, young limbs.

Something more than half the journey had been made when a furious gale, with a sudden deluge of snow, burst upon him. With the instinct of a mountaineer he felt that, fierce as it was, the storm would be short, and crept under the edge of a great rock for shelter till it was over. Here he ate the lunch of bread and bacon with which he had provided himself, and waited, peering often through the thick white curtain of the falling snow, to see if the sky gave any sign of clearing.

Once he thought he heard the sound of rushing snow on the slope above him. Then his heart beat fast, but he steadied

it with the thought that if a "snow cap" should come down and blockade him in his hiding-place he could dig himself out with his snow-shoes. It was too near the edge of the cliff for any great mass of snow to find a resting-place.

At length the storm spent itself, and the boy crept from his den, glad to stretch his cramped limbs, and eager to pursue his interrupted journey. But now a harder task than ever lay before him. It was with difficulty that he could push his way through the soft new snow which lay above the old crust, and the time in which he had hoped to make his trip had lengthened by weary hours, when at last, footsore and almost spent, he drew near its end.

As he rounded the last bend of the mountain, he looked eagerly ahead for a sight of the longed-for cabin. The next moment he stood in his tracks gazing around him with the bewildered air of one

who fears that he has lost his way. But only for an instant. The bare, scarred earth, the scattered rocks, the broken and uprooted trees, the missing cabin, all told him in another moment, that the "Demon of the Mountains" had swept across the place. And the men he had come to seek! Had they lost their lives in that wild, swift rush?

For a moment the boy's heart stood still, then it leaped with a sudden hope. His quick eyes noted that the disaster was *new*. No snow had fallen yet on the freshness of the desolation. Some time *since* the storm which held him a prisoner it must have occurred, and though the unfortunate miners had been caught in the ruin of their dwelling, it might not be too late to save them.

There was not a moment to be lost. With the thought came the instant consciousness that it rested with him to bring

help to the spot, and his knowledge of the country brought quick suggestion. A mile farther on was a group of mines known as the Silver Circle. Here a considerable number of men were employed in the winter's work, and a party might be secured for immediate action. He made no pause in starting, only to mark with his eyes a spot among the drifts far down the mountain, where a projecting piece of timber seemed to indicate a portion of the cabin ; then, worn as he was, but not conscious of it now, he set eagerly forward on his new errand.

But it was not given to Lex to accomplish that errand. In the midst of his journey one incautious step sent him out of his course and cut off at once all chance of doing anything for the unfortunate owners of the Lonely. He could hardly himself tell how it happened. A minute before he had noticed a cabin set

under a ledge of rock at some distance below him, and had paused, half inclined to make his way to it, in the hope of finding occupants who might at once help him in the work of rescue. But the question whether indeed it had occupants made him hesitate. Nothing is more common in some parts of the Rockies than the deserted cabin, the relic often of some hope cherished for a while and then abandoned by the seeker after gold and silver. This cabin had not fallen to decay, but it gave no sign of life. There was no smoke curling above its roof. It gave no answer to the shouts which Lex sent towards it with all the strength of his lungs. And, reflecting that if, on reaching it, he should find no one, he must retrace his steps with much delay and difficulty, the boy rejected his first thought and started impetuously on.

Then was it that he made that fatal

misstep on an icy place whose danger the light new snow concealed, and before he could stop or in the least control his course, he went plunging down the slope, clutching wildly at objects on either side, and half buried in the mass of snow that slid with him.

A minute, and he had struck the ledge which rose above the solitary cabin. His snow-shoes, which had flown from his feet, had darted on and reached the spot before him. And now the boy lay still, closing his eyes to the dizzy vision of mountains, rocks, and trees rushing madly past him. When he opened them again, the world stood still, and conscious though he was of racking pain, he made the mental comment, as he raised himself on his elbow and looked around, that he might have "gone farther and fared worse."

That he had fared badly enough, however, was quite clear to him when he

attempted to rise. The pain which darted through one ankle showed only too plainly that he had suffered a severe sprain. That he was really disabled he would not at first admit, but the failure of his desperate attempts to walk at last convinced him, and the tears which sprang to his eyes were not forced by pain, but by the certainty that in this mishap he had lost the power to pursue his journey.

There was nothing for him now but to make his way as best he could to the cabin and try his chances there. But first he must secure his snow-shoes. Luckily the tough fibre of the wood had borne the strain, and neither of them was broken. He regained them both; then, clambering on hands and knees, dragged himself painfully to the rough dwelling, and pushed open the unbolted door.

At first sight of the interior his hope of finding help rekindled. There were

signs of human occupancy, though no one was in sight. The house itself was merely the entrance to a hole in the mountain back of it, which, to the boy's experienced eye, showed as an incipient mine. He sent a cry through ringing depths, and waited breathlessly. But no answer came back, and he realized, with a thrill of despair, that the post was vacant, and that the disaster at the Lonely must remain for the present his own secret, powerless as he was to help.

And now, with the thought of his own necessities pressing upon him, he made closer examination of the cabin. There were blankets lying on a bunk in the corner; there was a heap of dry pine boughs beside the circle of stones which served as a fireplace; and—a sight more welcome still to the famished boy—just inside the mine was a small store of provisions.

The hope which had seemed dead for a moment revived again in his heart. Surely the owner of these things had not abandoned them! Some errand must have called him away, and even now he might be close at hand. The thought gave the boy new energy. He kindled a fire, melted snow, and prepared himself food, sure of the approval of the master of the house if he should return, and with ears alert for the first sound of his coming. But he did not come. The expectation grew fainter as the night drew on, and when at length, spent with the labor and pain of the day, Lex lay down to sleep, he knew that his last poor chance of sending help to the Lonely was gone. The only hope left to him now was that he might get back to Silvercrest in the morning.

But this hope did not outlast the restless night. The morning found his foot

more swollen than before, and the least attempt to bear weight upon it gave him intolerable pain. Feverish and heart-sick, the boy entered on the longest, dreariest day that he had ever known. To bathe his aching foot, to gaze from the cabin door across the dreary solitudes in the hope of descrying some human figure, to think with shuddering horror on the probable fate of his friends at the Lonely, and with gloomy forebodings on the future of the M. M. C.,—*these* were its occupations. The friendly cabin seemed to him now the gloomiest of dungeons, and in the bitterness of his heart he felt that no imprisonment had ever been so hard to bear as his.

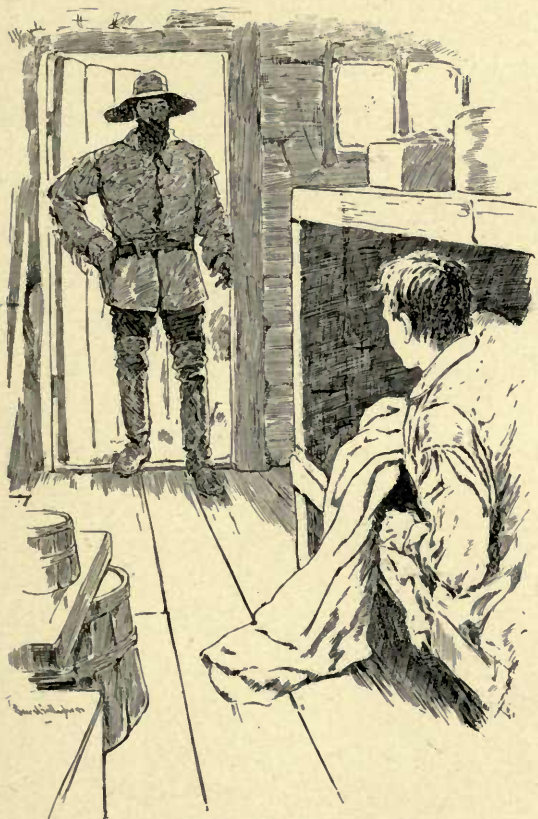
The day wore to an end at last, and in sheer exhaustion, though seemingly with no power to sleep, Lex stretched himself once more on his poor bed. It was far in the night when he was startled

by the pushing open of the door. In the moonlight he saw a tall man crossing the threshold and then draw suddenly back with an exclamation of amazement.

The rough figure in a suit of smoked buckskin, with boots reaching nearly to the thighs, and a broad hat slouching about the swarthy, bearded face, was just such a figure as Lex had been looking for, but he found himself at the moment surprised and unable to speak.

It was the newcomer who recovered himself first. "Hullo, youngster!" he exclaimed, advancing with long strides towards the boy. "How on earth did you come here?"

"I took a slide I wasn't counting on up above," said Lex, meeting his look with frank confidence, "and it knocked me up so I couldn't get on. Your shack was the nearest cover, and I had to crawl in and make free with your things."



"HE SAW A TALL MAN CROSSING THE THRESHOLD."

"That's right! That's right!" said the stranger, heartily. "Help yourself to anything you find laying in your way. That's my rule. But what was you shoeing it across the Blue Bonnet for? You don't belong hereabouts."

"No," said Lex. "I came up from Silvercrest, and my business was at the Lonely."

He broke off suddenly from the account of himself, and cried sharply: "There's been a slide there! Things are awfully torn up, and there ain't a sign of the Glynn boys' cabin left."

"I know all about that," said the man, with a nod. "I just came from there myself. You see," he continued, seating himself on the side of the bunk, "I ran out of coffee yesterday, and went over to the Silver Circle to see if I could get some. I meant to be back before this, but while I was there the boys got word

of that slide and I went over with 'em to help."

"Oh!" gasped Lex. Then the word which he had been so anxious to take had been carried by some other. He did not stop to inquire how this had come about; he only asked the result of the search, and the certainty that his poor friends could not have been saved by any effort of his was, with all the horror of the story, a kind of relief.

"But what took you to the Lonely?" queried the man, with returning curiosity as to his guest. Then, as if a sudden thought had struck him, he exclaimed: "I reckon you must be the chap that the Silvercrest folks were talking about. A party of 'em came up to look for the Glynn boys just as we got through. They said there was a fellow by the name of Flemming missing."

"Did they?" cried Lex. He knew

that Alice Hildreth must have told them, and though the fact showed her anxiety, he could not help feeling a touch of pleasure. "Well, I guess I'm the one they meant," he said.

He had no objection to telling the stranger his story now. Indeed, it was a relief to talk to some one after the solitude of this dreadful day. "What I started out for," he said frankly, "was to see if I could get Jerry Glynn to do some work for me—I mean for Uncle Eben Cornforth. He's the man I've lived with ever since I was a little chap. Maybe you know him."

"What, Old Hopeful?" exclaimed the other. "Well, I reckon. I knew him twenty years ago at Leadville, but I hain't seen him this good while."

His face lighted as he spoke, and Lex, spurred by a sudden hope, went on eagerly: "You see he's got a good claim

a little ways out of Silvercrest—a first-rate claim. It's the M. M. C., and we meant to work the assessment out this month. But his little girl was taken sick, and he had to go off to Redridge to see her when he'd only worked a few days. He hasn't got back yet, and I'm awfully afraid he'll lose the property. That's why I wanted to get Jerry. I thought I could strike a bargain with him to help me finish up the work."

"Well, you've struck a streak of bad luck all round," said the man. "But I reckon the Glynns ain't the only men to be had. I'd turn in myself and help you if it warn't for the Lady Bird here." He made a gesture towards the hole at the back of the cabin, and added: "My pardner failed me a few days back, and that left me in the lurch. By the time I get my own work done there won't be much left of the year."

The boy's face fell, and the speaker seeing it said kindly, "But I might do something for you at Silvercrest. I thought of going down to the funeral to-morrow. Owen Glynn used to be a pardner of mine, and I want to see him through."

"I mean to go in, too," said Lex, trying to speak confidently. "I guess my foot'll be well enough by that time."

"Let's see your foot," said the miner. He dropped on the floor beside the boy, and unwound the wet rags from the disabled member. Lex did not wince though the touch was none of the gentlest. He was watching the man's face intently for the first sign of his judgment on the case. It came, after a minute, in a low whistle and an emphatic shake of the head.

"Don't you think I can go in to-morrow?" pleaded Lex.

The miner was not in the habit of mincing unpleasant truths. "Don't you fool yourself," he said. "You'll do mighty well if you get out of here inside a fortnight. I've known fellows to be laid up better'n a month with this sort of thing."

The room swam suddenly before the boy's eyes. He turned his face from his companion, drew a fold of the rough blanket over it, and writhed in silence. The man was silent, too, but with a hand as gentle now as a woman's he bandaged up the foot, saying as he finished, "If I go into camp to-morrow, I'll get something or other in the way of stuff to rub it up with."

Lex looked piteously out from his cover. He tried to say "Thank you," but the words stuck in his throat. It seemed to him at that moment that he had nothing in the world to be thankful

for. His heart rebelled against his fate and vehemently refused to accept it. What! Sit down to nurse an aching foot when the time was on for action, and limp back to his post, beaten and helpless, when the game was lost! It seemed to Lex just then that he would rather have shared the fate at the Lonely.

Presently the owner of the Lady Bird pulled off his boots and lay down beside him. There had been no further words between them, but the man caught the sound of a smothered sob, and in tones of drowsy kindness said, "Hurts, don't it!"

"Oh, it ain't *that!* it ain't *that!*" moaned the boy.

Silence fell between them again. The man was dropping off to sleep, but the boy lay wide awake, thinking. Should he act upon the suggestion his new friend had made, and ask him to em-

ploy some one for the work in the M. M. C.? It was a possibility at which he grasped for a moment, but the objections which urged themselves against it were pressing and final. The offer of the money was a secret between himself and Alice Hildreth, and boy as he was, Lex felt that it would be unmanly to give it to the gossip of the mining camp or force her to transactions with a stranger. Besides, if he were unable to do any of the work himself, the sum required in payment would be greater than she had promised. No, unless he could see her himself, unless he could arrange the business and share the work, he would not take advantage of her offered kindness.

A sob deeper than before escaped him, and the miner, starting at the sound, raised himself on his elbow.

“Look here, youngster,” he said, “if

you're a-fretting about that claim, you just hold up. I reckon Old Hopeful ain't a-going to cry about it, if he does lose it. It ain't the first one he's had, and it won't be his last. There's as good fish in the sea as ever was caught, and as good mines in these mountains as ever was opened. Take your luck as it comes, and don't cry for a spent shot."

"But it ain't like losing a common claim," burst out Lex, unable any longer to restrain himself. "They've just struck it rich in a mine close by, and the man that owns that has laid his plans to get the M. M. C. He came in one night with another man to see how things stood, and I heard all the talk, when they didn't know I was there. It's Dudley Drayton that's aiming to get it, and he never misses."

The man was sitting upright now, thoroughly awake. He drew his hand

across his beard for a moment in silence, then said slowly: "Well, young feller, you keep a stiff upper lip. There's more ways than one to hold a claim. If you can't do it with a pick, try it with a Winchester, I say."

The eyes of the two met at the words, a fierce meaning in the older pair, a gleam of momentary consent in the boy's. Then the speaker added: "You rest easy here till I get done with the Lady Bird. Then we'll go in together. Blame me if I won't stand by you in this business and see you through!"

A quarter of an hour later the man was sound asleep, but a conflict sharper than ever was raging in the mind of the boy. He knew that in an appeal to firearms the issue was always uncertain, and moreover he had grave doubts whether Eben Cornforth would approve

such a course. With all his rough experience the old prospector had remained a man of peace. It was one of his boasts that he had never defended a property with a shot-gun. Would he be willing that another should do it for him?

And there was another doubt which forced itself on the poor boy's troubled thought. Could he safely rely on the good faith of this stranger comrade, to hold for another what he might so easily secure for himself? The thought shamed him as it came, but, try as he would, he could not fling it off.

Miserable and exhausted, he fell asleep at last. Then, while the little teacher dreamed of him, he, too, had a dream of her. He thought she stood beside him, as she stood on that last evening, her face aglow with generous feeling and clear, untroubled hope in her shining eyes. He woke with a start of pain,

and, covering his face with his hands, said bitterly to himself: "She doesn't know how things have gone against us! She doesn't know."

CHAPTER IX.

ONE MORE EFFORT.

AND so, with doubts and dreams and bitter heartache, that night wore away for Lex and Alice. To Lex the light came first, for pain and fever made the waking from his troubled sleep only too easy. One faint hope woke with him, and lifting himself cautiously, not to disturb the man who lay unconscious beside him, he set his feet to the floor and tried for an instant to stand erect. The next moment he lay back among the blankets, white to the lips, his eyes closed and a look of suffering on his face which faded slowly out into one of utter despair. It was the despair of all the hope and purpose which had filled his life dur-

ing these last strenuous weeks. He knew now that there was nothing left for him to do except,—and for an instant the dull ache at his heart changed to a sharp tingling pain,—except to send word of his defeat to the girl whose generous friendship had made his cause her own.

He had worded the little message in his thoughts many times before he had a chance to put it on paper, for his host slept on with a tranquillity which was almost maddening to the restless boy. There was a question, indeed, whether it could be put on paper at all, for there seemed to be none in the cabin except the old newspapers tacked against the wall. But the ingenuity of the owner, when at last he roused himself to the business of the day, supplied the need. The underside of the label from a can of tomatoes, which he opened with lavish hospitality, for breakfast, furnished a

smooth white space, and under the queer gay cover, Lex wrote his sorrowful note.

"It's for the little teacher," he said, entrusting it to his host when the latter set out for Silvercrest, "and I should be ever so much obliged if you'd give it to her. She's been a good friend to me, and I'm afraid she worries about my not getting back."

"I'll do anything I can for you," said the man, heartily, and he added, with genuine sympathy in his face and voice: "It's terrible hard lines for you to have to stay behind here. I wouldn't leave you if it warn't for this 'ere funeral. I reckon it's more lonesome when I'm gone."

"Oh, I don't mind staying alone," said Lex. "I'm glad you're going, so I can send the note. Maybe Miss Hildreth will be at the funeral. They'll most likely have it at the school-house, and you can give it to her there."

"But how shall I know who she is?" queried the miner, and he added with a twist of his mouth, as he looked down at his rough clothes, "I ain't much of a figger to make up to ladies."

"Oh, she don't mind folks' clothes," cried Lex. "And as for knowing her, you can't miss of that. There's nobody else that looks like *her*."

He paused as if to find some suitable word of description, then, with obvious despair of doing so, added, "You can't tell what the difference is till you see her, but you'll know her by the look in her eyes and the soft pretty color she's got. And if she isn't at the school-house, please leave it for her at St. Cloud's. There's where she lives, in the white house at the head of the street."

It is doubtful if Lex Flemming's ambassador got any definite idea of Alice Hildreth's personal appearance from the

boy's intimation of its superiority to that of all other maidens, but he had no hesitation in deciding that she was not in the school-house when he joined the group assembled there. The few women whispering in a corner were evidently the wives of miners, and without waiting to make needless inquiries he decided to occupy the time which still remained before the brief service in despatching the errand at the cottage.

As he drew near the house, he saw a girl leaning on the gate before it, a white shawl about her head, and her face lifted towards the mountains. She looked almost as young as the boy himself. Could this be the teacher? It seemed impossible. But the one word of distinct description which Lex had given flashed upon his memory at that moment and brought decision. There was indeed a "soft pretty color" in her face, just a

touch, pale though it was to-day, of the color which tinges arbutus blossoms on New England hills in spring, and the Western man noted it with quick appreciation.

Wrapped in her own thoughts, she did not see him till he stood before her. Starting, and flushing under his evident scrutiny, she was turning away when his voice arrested her.

"Be you the teacher?" he asked.

The girl turned back with a smile. This man, whose face she had forgotten, was probably the father of one of her pupils. "I was the teacher a little while ago," she answered, in a soft, pleasant voice.

The man drew a step nearer. "Do you know a boy by the name of Lex Flemming?" he asked.

The color flew from the girl's cheeks. She clasped her hands on the gate and

leaned towards the stranger with a breathless eagerness. "Oh, yes!" she cried. "Do you know where he is?"

"Well, I reckon I do," replied the man, with deliberation. "I know where he was at seven o'clock this morning, and I'll go bail fer it he ain't fur from there now. He's got a mighty slim chance to travel."

He thrust his hand into his pocket as he spoke, and drew out that brilliant bit of paper. "He wrote something inside o' that fer you," he said, extending it towards her.

The thought that she might have some message to send in reply, and the attraction of her face, kept him standing while she read it. It ran, —

MISS HILDRETH : —

Dear Teacher, — I couldn't keep my promise to you though I tried my best. Things have gone against us. I got to the Lonely all right, but I found the cabin had gone in a slide, and I thought

if I could get help quick, maybe we could save the boys. So I struck over towards the Silver Circle, but I slipped on the way and sprained my foot. Then I couldn't get on or come back. I crawled into a cabin that was near by, and that's where I am now. There's no knowing how long I shall have to stay here. The man says it may be weeks. I guess it's all up with the M. M. C. There's no way now unless he happens to get back in time. Good bye, and thank you for all your kindness.

Your respectful pupil,

ALEXANDER FLEMMING.

He had written it with dry eyes, determined to make no further drain upon her pity by any moan of his. But the girl read it through tears that brimmed over, and fell in great, hurrying drops upon the paper. Whether they were tears of joy or sorrow she could not have told; such a rush of mingled feeling came with the reading of those short, unsentimental lines. He was safe then, safe! The visions of sudden death, which

had tortured her through so many dreadful hours, faded from her thoughts not to take shape again. Thank God, he was safe! Yes, but his hope was gone. The brave, strong purpose, dear to him almost as his life, was broken. She knew, she, with her true, loyal heart, what it had meant to him when he wrote, "It's all up with the M. M. C." She knew in what bitterness of soul he must have accepted the issue. Oh, if she could save him from this!

And with the longing there came to her at that moment a thought like an inspiration, a thought which had never entered her mind before, but which leaped instantly into clear and definite resolve. The tears in her eyes seemed all at once to flash themselves dry. She straightened herself, and the shawl fell from her head. Then, in a low, thrilling voice, she said, —

"It is *not* all up with the M. M. C.!

Tell Lex I said so. There is one way left, and I will take it."

The boldness of her thought seemed to overwhelm her for a moment. She paused; then, in the same voice, but more gently, said, "I'm so glad he's safe! Tell him I've thought about him all the time. And tell him to keep up courage, and trust in God. *He* can make things come out right."

She said the last words solemnly, looking straight into her listener's eyes; then, as if unable to hear or speak another word, turned suddenly away.

The man stood as if rooted to the spot till the door of the cottage closed behind her; then, with his face working curiously, started down the street. "Well, of all the messages that ever was giv' to me, if that don't beat 'em!" he muttered to himself.

Some incongruity between the word

and himself as the bearer of it appeared to strike him, for he muttered his own name twice as if it were an expletive. "But I'll give it to him, jest as she said it," he muttered presently. "It's mighty queer doctrine fer these parts, but she looked as if she knew what was inside of it. I reckon there must be something between 'em — God and that girl."

At that moment Alice was standing alone in her chamber, her hands clasped, and her face pale with the purpose which had so suddenly laid hold of her. Again she read that little note, and her heart refused to echo its despair. No, everything had *not* been done to save the M. M. C. There was one thing more to do, and she would do it. She would go for help to Mr. Dudleigh Drayton himself!

She did not give her resolution a moment's time to cool. Two minutes

later she was on her way to Mr. Drayton's office. As yet, no shadow of doubt had fallen upon her purpose. She felt like one divinely called to set a wrong right, and her heart leaped forward to the mission. As she walked she considered what she should say, and her Puritan training brought swift suggestion. She remembered the story of David and the prophet Nathan, and it pleased her to fancy herself standing before this rich, ambitious schemer, as the man of God had stood before the king, laying bare the covetousness of his heart, and the wrong he purposed to his humble neighbor. She would tell her story well, and when his soul was stirred with indignation, she would cry out like the prophet, "*Thou art the man!*"

In this exalted state of mind she reached the door of Mr. Drayton's office. The short, business-like call, "Come

in," with which he answered her knock, brought her once more into the world of ordinary action. She turned the knob, with a sudden flutter at her heart, and obeyed the call.

Mr. Drayton was sitting at his desk, with a cigar in his mouth, apparently quite engrossed with a column of figures down which his pencil was rapidly moving. He glanced up carelessly in another moment, and, starting at the sight of his unusual caller, tossed his cigar aside and came towards her with extended hand.

"Why, Miss Hildreth," he said, "you give me an unexpected pleasure; but this is a morning of surprises. Have you heard the good news?"

"About Lex Flemming?" she said, barely touching his proffered hand. "Yes, I have heard it. It was that which made me come to see you."

"Well, I am glad to exchange congratulations," said Mr. Drayton, a little puzzled, but quite at ease. "Lex is a splendid fellow, and deserves better of fortune than to lose his life in a snow-slide. The whole camp has been anxious about him, but you, I fancy, most of all. I believe he was one of your best scholars."

"Yes," said Alice, and then she was silent again. It was astonishing how hard it had grown to disclose the real object of her coming. Her fingers worked nervously with the buttons of her cloak and she knit her forehead in the effort to find some suitable beginning for her intended speech.

He had set a chair for her and resumed his own seat, wondering a little at her evident embarrassment, but he filled the pause again with ready politeness.

"Yes, indeed, the news must be a relief to you. Missing people are not always

heard from so quickly, and, hidden away as the boy is in that out-of-the-way corner, it is very remarkable that news of him should have reached us so soon. The Fates must have taken pity on your suspense. I am sure the sight of your face yesterday would have moved the sternest of them."

The girl grew more nervous than before. It would never do to let the conversation drift like this. She felt that she *must* speak out, and at that moment, by a lucky suggestion of memory, something to say did actually occur to her. It was not at all a good beginning for a speech like that of Nathan, but somehow she had forgotten all about Nathan, and she could not wait for anything better.

"Mr. Drayton," she exclaimed, leaning suddenly towards him, "do you remember telling me on that first morning of the blockade, when you called at my cousin's,

that I mustn't worry about having no work here in Silvercrest, for I should be sure to find something to do?"

Mr. Drayton smiled. "I believe I do remember saying something of that sort. And have you found anything to do?"

"Yes," said Alice, "something very important. But the trouble is I can't do it myself."

"Oh, you have found something for somebody else to do!" laughed Mr. Drayton. "Well, that is not usually a difficult matter. People often have that good fortune."

He leaned easily back in his chair now and waited for her to go on, expecting some appeal for charity, to which, for the sake of the fair solicitor, he was prepared to respond generously. He supposed his manner to be quite inviting, but apparently she did not find it so. Her color rose at his amused laugh, and there was a



"HE WAITED FOR HER TO GO ON."

note of injured feeling in her voice as she said, "But, indeed, I would do it if I could! It's because I'm so helpless, in spite of all my trying, that I come to you."

She forced herself to make no pause now, and went on swiftly: "Mr. Drayton, the reason that Lex Flemming went out to the Lonely was because he wanted to get some one to help him in the M. M. C. He was troubled because the assessment work for this year isn't done, and he couldn't bear the thought that Mr. Cornforth might lose it, when he has worked so hard all his life and been disappointed so many times."

She paused, looking imploringly at Mr. Drayton, but he only said rather coldly, "Cornforth should have taken measures in time to protect his property."

"Yes," faltered Alice, "but you know he worked for you till late in the season,

and then he had to leave everything to go to his little girl, when he had only just begun on the M. M. C. She was very sick; she might be dying. He couldn't refuse such a call."

Mr. Drayton frowned a little.

"Of course not," he said. "But Cornforth is too old a miner not to understand the risk he takes when he puts off working his claim till the last moment allowed by law. His working for me was a matter of his own choice. These prospectors need a lesson now and then to teach them the importance of promptness."

For a moment Alice's eyes grew dim, but with a great effort she forced back the tears. After all, she must plead, not arraign.

"But Lex!" she cried. "He is not to blame, and he has tried so hard to save it! He worked every day after

Mr. Cornforth went away, living out there alone — though we wanted him to stay with us — because he thought he ought to be doing everything he could in the mine. He said his work would count for half as much as a man's, and he hoped Mr. Cornforth would get back in time to finish the rest. But he grew more anxious after that strike in the Nonesuch, and felt that he *must* have some one to help him."

She dropped her eyes at the mention of the Nonesuch, blushing in spite of herself.

"I suppose he thought that *I* might relocate the M. M. C.," said Mr. Drayton, coolly. "Well, I should be likely enough to do so if the owner abandoned it. It is in the neighborhood of my property, and whether there is anything in it or not, it might be worth my while to hold it."

"Oh, yes," said Alice. "I know that. But I thought if you understood everything, you would rather not have it."

He looked uncomfortable for a moment. She had said a word now that somehow embarrassed him. She did not realize it, but went on more earnestly than before, her voice gathering the ring of a deeper and truer appeal.

"Oh, Mr. Drayton, it would be so hard for Lex to see it lost after all he has done! He worked there so steadily, denying himself every pleasure, and then he took that terrible journey to the Lonely, though he must have known all the danger. He never turned from his purpose for one moment, only when he tried to get help for the men who were lost in the slide. And now he is hurt and can do nothing more. He may have to stay out there for weeks. It is the hardest thing that could have

come to him. Oh, I can think just how he feels, shut up there with his pain, held back from all that he was so anxious to do! It must seem to him as if all the world had gone against him, and there was no use in trying. It will hurt him all his life—a failure like this, and he is so young and brave!”

Mr. Drayton was moved. He valued courage and energy,—no man more highly than he,—and little as he felt disposed to sympathize with Eben Cornforth in a loss which his own prudence might have prevented, he felt sincerely sorry for the boy. His voice gave no sign of relenting, however, when he said,—

“But, Miss Hildreth, if I should make no effort to secure the M. M. C., there are others who would do so. My failing to act could make no difference in the end to Cornforth.”

"Oh, not if others had a chance!" cried the girl. "But I thought you could prevent all that. I thought you could find some men who would finish the work for Mr. Cornforth, and surely no one could take it away from him *then*."

It is not likely that Mr. Dudleigh Drayton had ever received a proposition in his life which surprised him as much as this. For a moment he was startled out of his habitual courtesy, and stared at the girl as if doubting whether he had really understood her.

She flushed under the look, then, feeling that she had omitted an important item, said quickly, "There was money at Lex's disposal to pay for all the work."

"Oh," said Mr. Drayton, recovering himself. "So Cornforth had forethought enough to provide that! He should

have attended to the business of securing help and saved the boy all this anxiety."

"Oh, Mr. Cornforth didn't leave the money," cried Alice, roused instantly to the old prospector's defence. "It is from a friend of his."

"A friend!" repeated Mr. Drayton. "And why does not this friend take the measures which you have suggested to me?"

A flame of color swept over the girl's face and neck. "His friend is not—" she began, but her voice broke. Under the scrutiny of those keen gray eyes she could not finish the sentence as she had intended. With a rushing humiliating sense of her own helplessness, she cried, "His friend is not of much account!" and hid her burning face in both her hands.

If she had looked at Mr. Drayton

instead, she would have seen at that instant a wave of new intelligence sweep over his face, and then a sudden breaking up of all its sternness. When she lifted hers a moment later, she did not see it, for he had turned away. He was standing before a window apparently quite unconscious of her presence. She choked down a sob and rose from her seat. She had disclosed a part of her story which she had meant to keep a secret, and she had broken down. There was nothing for her now but to escape as decently as she could from the scene of her failure. She only waited for Mr. Drayton to turn.

But he did not turn at once. Man of the world as he was, it needed a few minutes to adjust himself to the feeling which had come over him. He had not changed his opinion as to his right to do the thing he had intended, nor was he smitten with self-reproaches. But the

simplest thing in the world had happened. He had come suddenly face to face with another's generous action, and it stirred him to a new, unselfish impulse. He saw it all, the sacrifice of her earnings, which this girl had offered to save the old man's hope, and from his point of view the sacrifice seemed vastly greater than it ever had to her. For a moment his own rules of action seemed poor and mean. An older rule, which he had almost forgotten in the rush of his prosperous life, came back to him, and the words, "Even as ye would that men should do unto you," sounded in his ears. It was the nobler rule. He saw and felt it. With the insight of the moment he obeyed it.

When he turned, his face was very grave, but there was something in it which the girl had never seen before.

"Eben Cornforth is a fortunate man,"

he said. "He could have no better friend."

He looked at her with a strange gentleness for a moment; then, with a smile and something of his old easy manner, added, "We'll see what we can do in this matter. I think I can contrive to act as Cornforth's agent,—that is what you wish, I believe,—and set some men to finish his work. But as for the pay—please let me attend to that. It would be the better way. Cornforth and I have had dealings before, and I'll settle with him when he comes back."

The tears came now. There was no keeping them back, nor the sob with which her throat was full at that moment. "Oh, you are very, very kind!" she said, and her hand went out to him now with a pleading eagerness. "I can't tell you how much I thank you, and oh, *they* will thank you even more than I."

"No, indeed," said Mr. Drayton, holding her hand. "It is you they shall thank."

She was gone a moment later, and he was alone in his office. But the figures on his desk had apparently lost their interest. For some minutes he sat absorbed in thought, then he pushed his papers together and passed out to the street.

CHAPTER X.

AT LAST.

IT seemed to Alice Hildreth that new heavens and a new earth were around her when she stepped out of Mr. Drayton's office on that never-to-be-forgotten day. Even the mountains had lost their awful sternness, and with the sunshine on their brows seemed smiling down upon the world in a great benignant calmness. After all, Nature was not cruel nor were men. There was kindness everywhere, and hope and joy.

In the midst of her happiness she remembered suddenly that Mrs. St. Cloud had as yet no share in the gladness of this news from Lex, and ashamed of her own forgetfulness, she quickened her

steps and hurried back to the cottage. She found Mrs. St. Cloud in the sitting-room with Tommy, surrounded by building-blocks, and giving her attention rather impatiently to the extensive constructions with which the young architect was covering the carpet.

"Oh, Tommy," she was saying, as the girl burst into the room, "don't let's make any more of those horrid smelters and ore-houses. Let's build a meeting-house with a big, high steeple, such as they have back East."

Whether Tommy would have taken kindly to the suggestion is doubtful, but the sight of Alice's radiant face at that moment gave sudden pause to his mother's interest in his affairs. "Has Lex come?" she cried, starting towards the girl, while her dress swept like an avalanche across the ruined smelter.

"No; but he has been heard from.

He is safe," gasped Alice. She told the story as fast as her half-breathless state would allow, and even the exasperated Tommy forgot his grievances, and demolished the last of his promising young mining-plant with a flying somersault when she had ended. As for Mrs. St. Cloud, she hugged the girl in an ecstasy, while she protested between cries of joy that it was almost too good to be true.

But there was one point on which, as her feelings settled to a calmer state, she was not quite satisfied, and indeed she felt that she had some grounds of complaint against Alice herself. This was the fact that Lex Flemming's messenger had been allowed to come to the cottage and go away again unknown to herself.

"I shouldn't have thought you would have let that man get away without my seeing him," she said reproachfully. "I

don't suppose he knows a thing about taking care of a sprain, or has a bandage in his cabin. I'd have given him a roll of my linen, and told him just how to manage. I declare, Alice, I wonder at you."

But Mrs. St. Cloud was not to be cheated of her kindly service. It was not too late for it now; and she at once set about making the bandages, to which she added a pair of her husband's softest hose and a bottle of liniment. To these Alice further added a note, and "Gulliver's Travels," a gift which she felt sure would be a boon to the boy during the days of his enforced idleness.

Provided with these things, the two started out to find the bearer of the day's great news, but they were too late to find him at the school-house. The brief service was already over, and he had taken his place in the funeral train which was moving through the camp.

A weird spectacle it was. A dozen miners drew the rough coffins containing the bodies of their unfortunate comrades on a hand-sled, towards the hollow among the hills which had been set apart as a burial ground. There were no symbols of mourning. In their working-clothes, and mounted on snow-shoes, the bearers moved steadily on, followed by a score or more of people from the camp.

To Alice, at least, there was an inexpressible pathos in the scene, and she watched it with eyes full of tears till a bend in the road hid it from view. She had not known these men for whom the camp kept its moment of silence, but their lives had seemed to touch hers in their strange tragic ending, and perhaps the pitying tenderness with which her heart mourned their fate was the gentlest tribute which the world gave them.

Later in the day, when the cortège had

returned, Mrs. St. Cloud, with the help of her husband, found the man she was so anxious to meet, and delivered to him her package, with copious instructions as to the care of the wounded foot. The instructions, however, she was not at all sure he grasped. He seemed to her a remarkably stupid person, as she told Alice afterwards, and she declared that she should not be surprised if he did just the opposite of everything she told him.

But Mrs. St. Cloud did the owner of the Lady Bird scant justice. The truth was, at the time she met him, he was suffering from a partial stupefaction caused by an interview he had just had with Mr. Drayton. That gentleman, waylaying him on the street, had questioned him about the boy he had left in his cabin; after which, in the most explicit manner, he had bade him tell the lad that he knew a couple of men who wanted a job, and he would see

that they were at once employed for Eben Cornforth on the work in the M. M. C. He added with emphasis that the boy was to give himself no further anxiety in the matter, and walked away before the astonished miner could collect his faculties for a word of reply.

The subject was food for meditation to him on his way home. "If it don't beat everything!" he muttered to himself more than once. "Put what the girl said and what he said together, and it's enough to make a man think he's gone 'over the range' without knowing it. Maybe the boy can see through it, but blame me if I can!"

And the owner of the Lady Bird was not the only one who found it hard to understand Mr. Drayton's action in this matter. At supper that night Mr. St. Cloud remarked: "There's an odd story afloat about Drayton to-night. They say

he's taken a couple of hands off the Nonesuch and set them to work for Cornforth in the M. M. C. It's a new departure for him — if there's any truth in it," he added doubtfully.

"Oh, it must be true," cried Alice, her eyes sparkling with a sudden delight in the news he had given her. "He told me this morning he would see that the work was done, and that's just the way he is doing it."

The piece of pie which was on its way to Mr. St. Cloud's mouth paused midway in its passage. "Well," he exclaimed, "this is interesting. I should like to know how you came to be talking with Drayton on that subject."

"Why, I went to him on purpose," said Alice, beginning to blush, but meeting his look without flinching.

Mr. St. Cloud laid down the piece of pie now, and looked at his cousin as if

he were not quite sure that she was the same person who ordinarily sat beside him at the table. For a moment he seemed to have no words at his command. Then he asked slowly, "Do you happen to remember the arguments you used to persuade him?"

"Oh, it wasn't my argument, at all," said the girl, earnestly. "Nothing I urged seemed to affect him in the least. It's just because he's so good and generous."

"Humph!" said Mr. St. Cloud. Perhaps he found her apparent unconsciousness of having done anything remarkable a trifle exasperating, for he asked impressively: "Do you know, Alice, that going to Drayton was a very extraordinary move on your part? If there was any man in Silvercrest likely to have his eye on that particular claim, it was Drayton himself."

"Oh, yes, I knew it, and Lex knew it, too," said the girl, her voice growing a little unsteady. "It was *that* which made me feel I must go to him for help. Everything else had failed us. Lex couldn't do anything more, and there was no other way left. Don't you see?" she added imploringly.

Mr. St. Cloud drew his hand across his forehead as if he suspected himself of being under some hallucination. "No, I don't see," he said, after a moment. "You say everything else had failed you. What does all this mean? Have you and Lex been in league together?"

The flush had faded from Alice's face and left it rather pale, but she did not hesitate. There was nothing to conceal, since the generous action she intended had been undertaken by another.

"Yes, I was in league with Lex," she said quietly. "I promised him the

money to pay for the work, if he could only get help."

The amazement on the faces of her listeners had its effect now, and she added hotly: "How could I keep my money for myself when he needed it so much? He told me all his trouble the night he was here, and I believe it would have broken my heart if I couldn't have done anything to help him."

Mr. St. Cloud's ideas were evidently clearing. "Did Drayton know of this?" he asked, with his own voice a little shaky.

Alice dropped her head. "Yes," she said; "I let it out at the end, though I didn't mean to. Somehow he looked at me so that I couldn't keep anything back. But I'm not to pay the money, after all. He wouldn't let me. He said he would arrange it all himself."

Mr. St. Cloud ate the piece of pie now.

He even drank his coffee before he spoke again. Then he said very tenderly, "My dear little girl, why didn't you tell me of all this before?"

"Cousin John," she cried, "I did feel kind of guilty not to tell you, and if I'd had any idea of the trouble that would come I should certainly have done it. I'm sure now it would have been the better way, and I came within an inch of doing it right at the first. But the truth is I was afraid to tell you. I knew you had no patience with miners who left their assessment work till the very end of the year. Besides, after I promised the money, it seemed like letting my left hand know what my right hand was doing, and —"

"And running the risk of getting your right hand soundly scolded into the bargain, I suspect," said Mr. St. Cloud. "Well, my dear, I should very likely have done it. I'm a sterner man than Drayton

— a good deal sterner.” And the genial head of the house squared himself in his chair and tried to look as grim as possible. But he was smiling at her, with something suspiciously like pride in his eyes the very next moment.

It was Mrs. St. Cloud who filled the pause that followed with an accent of genuine reproach in her voice. “Well,” she said, “I suppose it’s no use talking, now that things have come out as they have. But it was tempting Providence all the same, and I must say, Alice, that I wouldn’t, for all the world, urge on a friend of mine to take such awful risks as Lex Flemming has. All the gold in the country isn’t worth it.”

The girl winced, and Mr. St. Cloud said gayly: “I don’t believe Alice will do it again, Kitty. I’ll answer for it that she won’t spur the heroic youths of Silvercrest to their own destruction any more this

season. For one thing, she won't have a chance. She's booked for a journey very soon now, unless all signs fail. This blockade is about ended, and there'll be no keeping her after that."

And Mr. St. Cloud was right. There were only two days more for Alice in the mining camp. Then she took her place in the out-going stage coach, and, waving good bye to the friends who stood sorrowfully watching, started on the long-deferred journey. There was but one unsatisfied wish in her heart. If she only could have seen Lex Flemming once more!

But Lex was still in exile. A weary time had yet to pass before he could leave the stranger's cabin. At last, paler than he had ever been before, and limping a little, he was seen one day in the street of Silvercrest, and an eager crowd gathered round to give him welcome. Mr. Drayton was among the number, and when the rest

had dropped away, he led the boy into the office where Alice Hildreth had plead his cause on that anxious morning. What passed between them was known only to the two, but from that interview Lex came out, sworn in the depths of his heart to a friendship which would never know change again for the man whom he had once longed to defeat and defy.

For Mr. Drayton, too, the hour had its meaning. He had read the boy like an open book—the perfect loyalty of his nature, the steadiness of purpose, the power of quick, resolute action. For such a boy large things were possible, and—the thought was born of that earlier generosity—he should have help in winning them.

There was no reason now why Lex should return to his lonely life at the M. M. C., and he made Mrs. St. Cloud happy by accepting her invitation to stay

in her house till the old prospector's return. But the visit did not prove a long one. A few days later Eben Cornforth himself returned to the camp. He had lingered at the bedside of his child till the long, fierce fever was broken, too much absorbed in his anxiety for her to take thought or care for the work he had so suddenly left.

That night, listening in the firelight of his own cabin, the old man heard the story of all that had so strangely passed in his absence, and never had any other tale stirred him like that. Sometimes he interrupted it with wondering questions; sometimes he walked the floor, his face quivering with emotion; and more than once he wiped his eyes from the overflowing tears.

"God bless you both! God bless the little teacher!" he said brokenly when the tale was ended. "I wish I could have seen

her just once more to thank her for all she's done. But we'll do it, Lex, my boy, one of these days. We'll go back to the old Bay State together, you and I and little Mary, and then we'll see her and thank her with something more than words."

The firelight fell upon his glowing face. All that had been hard and disappointing in the past dropped far behind him, and Hope threw her light, fairer than ever, on his forward path.

It was six months later, just half a year from the time Alice Hildreth returned home, that she received on the same day two copies of *The Mountain Blast*. On the wrapper of one was Lex Flemming's well-known writing, but the other was addressed in a rapid business hand which she did not remember to have seen before. She opened the papers, and on the page

devoted to mining news, found the same paragraph marked in each, It ran, —

“ Among the sales of the week we note the transfer of a half interest in the M. M. C. from Eben Cornforth to Dudleigh Drayton. Cornforth, who located the claim two years ago, has been steadily pushing the development since the beginning of the year, and has uncovered a considerable body of ore, of sufficient value to warrant Drayton in putting some capital into it. That he has done so is sufficient assurance that the property will now be worked for all there is in it. We congratulate both parties on the transaction, and predict a future for the M. M. C. which will make it necessary to change the time-honored title of the senior partner from ‘Old Hopeful’ to ‘Old Successful.’ ”

There was a dancing light in the girl's eyes as she laid down the paper. With a

quick, delighted fancy she pictured these two, whose interests had once been so opposed, sharing together the treasure in the M. M. C. "Oh, I'm glad he got it that way instead of the other!" she said to herself, thinking of Mr. Drayton. "It'll be worth so much more to him."

And then her thoughts turned with a deeper gladness to the old prospector. It was sweet to believe that a future of prosperity was unfolding for him; sweeter still to feel that she herself had had a share in bringing it about. It was compensation out of all measure for the heartsick days and the homesick weeks she had spent in the mining camp during that wintry blockade.

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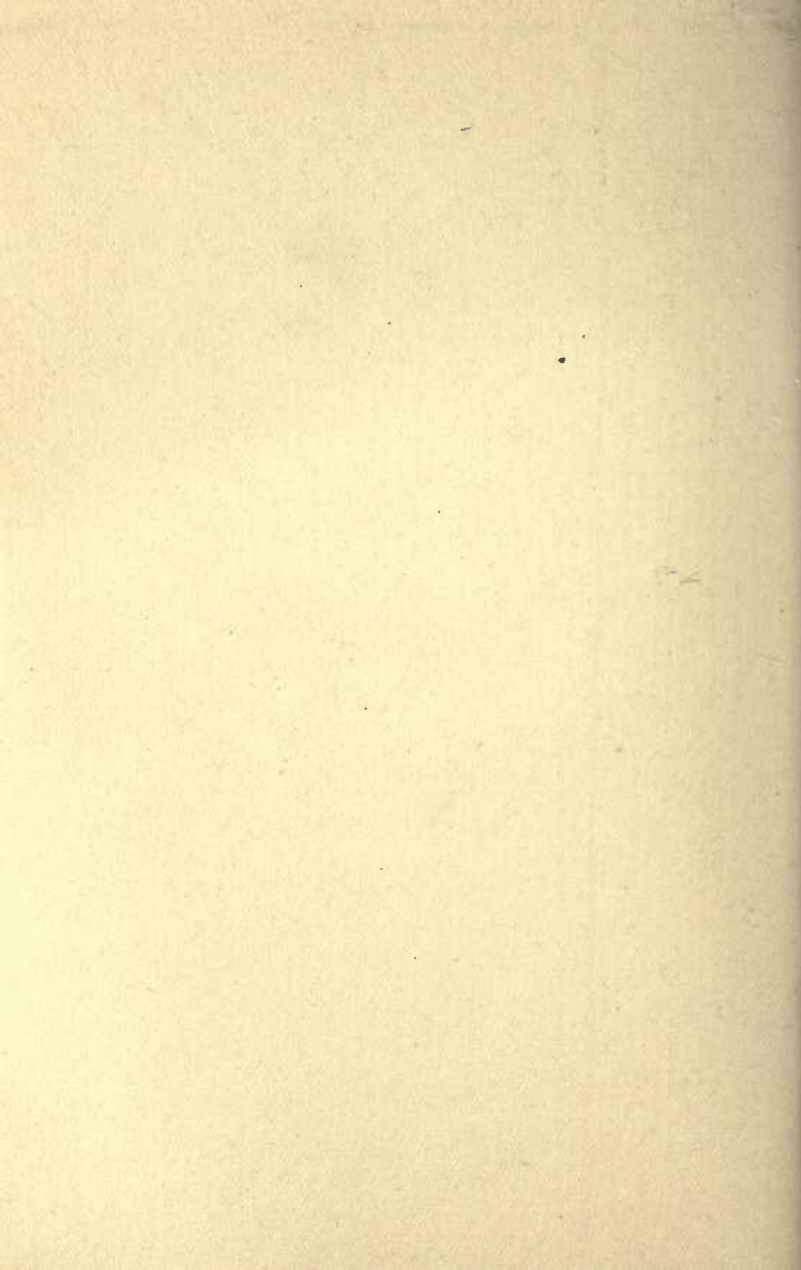
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